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THE USE OF COMPARISON IN POLITICS BY ELSA CONCI  
IN HER EDUCATION AND TRAINING SPEECHES AND PRACTICES

L'UTILIZZO DELLA COMPARAZIONE IN POLITICA DA PARTE  
DI ELSA CONCI NEI DISCORSI E NELLE PRATICHE DI FORMAZIONE

*Elsa Conci was one of the 21 women elected to the Constituent Assembly on 2nd June 1946. During her political career, she was in the leadership of the Christian Democratic party and was very active in parliament. From 1954 to 1958, she was appointed representative of the House of Deputies to the advisory assembly of the Council of Europe. From 1954 to 1964, she was a national delegate of the Christian Democratic Women's Movement. She believed firmly in the European ideal. In 1955, Elsa Conci was among the founders of the European Women's Union, thus promoting Christian Democratic women's membership in a European organisation. In 1959, in Berlin, she was elected president of this Union and held that office until 1963. This paper analyses the use of comparison in the political speeches and political education press articles that Elsa Conci addressed to women in the period between 1954 and 1964. In Conci's view, the purpose of comparison was political and social, although also interpretation became an important aspect in the last few years of her career. She used the press – namely a magazine called *Donne d'Italia* – to educate and train her readers to develop a broad-ranging vision, to equip them intellectually to work in civil society, thus promoting their involvement in public life.*

Elsa Conci è una delle 21 donne elette all'Assemblea Costituente il 2 giugno 1946. Durante la sua attività politica fece parte del gruppo dirigente della Democrazia Cristiana ed ebbe un'intensa attività parlamentare. Dal 1954 al 1958 fece parte della Rappresentanza della Camera all'assemblea consultiva del Consiglio d'Europa. Dal 1954 al 1964 è stata delegata nazionale del Movimento Femminile Democratico Cristiano. Convinta sostenitrice dell'ideale europeo, nel 1955 Elsa Conci è stata tra le fondatrici dell'Unione Europea Femminile promuovendo l'ingresso delle donne democristiane in un organismo europeo e nel 1959 venne eletta a Berlino Presidente di questa Unione fino al 1963. In queste pagine ci si propone di analizzare l'utilizzo della comparazione nei discorsi politici e nelle attività di formazione politica, a mezzo stampa, destinate alle donne negli anni che vanno dal 1954 al 1964. Le finalità della comparazione per la Conci sono politiche e sociali, negli ultimi anni si aggiunge l'aspetto interpretativo. Fa uso degli organi di stampa, *Donne d'Italia*, per formare le lettrici ad una visione di ampio respiro, per attrezzarle intellettualmente ad operare nella società civile e per promuovere quindi il loro inserimento nella vita pubblica.

*Key words: political education and training; women; Christian Democratic Party; comparison; politics.*

Parole chiave: formazione politica; donne; Democrazia Cristiana; comparazione; politica.

Elsa Conci was one of the 21 women elected to the Constituent Assembly on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1946 (Morelli 2007; Roverselli 2017).

Born in 1895 in Trento, she was the daughter of Enrico Conci, member of the Parliament of Vienna as representative of the Trentino Region and then senator of the



Republic of Italy from 1948 to 1953 (Saltori 2013). Elsa spent the early years of her life in Innsbruck and Vienna where she began her studies. In 1915, she and her family went into exile to Linz, because her father had stood up for the independence of Trentino from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. She completed her studies in Rome, where she graduated in Humanities and modern languages. From 1923 on, she taught German in teacher training colleges in Trento. In 1945, she founded the Christian Democratic Party of Trentino and she established the women's political movement in the Province of Trento. In 1946, she was elected member of the Constituent Assembly from the Christian Democrats' lists. At each subsequent election, she was re-elected with a very large number of votes and remained in parliament until her death, on 1st November 1965.

During her political career, she was in the leadership of her political party and was very active in parliament. As a border woman, she had always been aware of the independence issue and ready to listen to the claims of German-speaking South Tyroleans. From 1954 to 1958, she was appointed representative of the House of Deputies to the advisory assembly of the Council of Europe. From 1954 to 1964, she was a national delegate of the Christian Democratic Women's Movement.

She believed firmly in the European ideal. In 1955, Elsa Conci was among the founders of the European Women's Union, thus promoting Christian Democratic women's membership in a European organisation. In 1959, in Berlin, she was elected president of this Union and held that office until 1963. She was a member of the Italian delegation to the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

The following pages will analyse the use of comparison in the political speeches and political education press articles that Elsa Conci addressed to women in the period between 1954 and 1964. The focus of this study will be mainly on the initiatives and writings related to and produced during her membership in the European Women's Union, rather than those on the Women's Movement and Christian Democratic Party, which will form the object of future papers. The analysis will take a pedagogical perspective, with a view to understanding the educational purposes in Conci's works.

The nature and systematic degree of comparison depend on how Elsa Conci used it as a professional politician. As is known, the comparative analysis of political and educational systems has always played a significant role in policy making, since politicians have frequently relied on the results of comparative research to make their political decisions, although the latter have actually stemmed from a variety of causes in addition to the findings of comparative research (Wastiau-Schlüter 2014; Longo 2014). Politicians too often delude themselves in believing they can learn practical lessons from other countries' systems, but the theoretical weakness and potential pitfalls of this assumption should be highlighted (Cowen 2014). Analysing the way in which Elsa Conci used comparison means trying to enlighten the complex link between comparative research and politics.

The bibliographical references used for the purpose of this research study are mainly press articles authored by Elsa Conci and published in a political education magazine for Christian Democratic women called *Donne d'Italia*. Those press articles

may be described as her travel accounts. They are very interesting official reports containing information on both their author and the countries she described, hence on the reasons for Conci's critical attitude towards the Italian society as well as on the reasons for her enthusiasm and engagement vis-à-vis the foreign societies she visited. Travel literature and journalism and their political relevance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were extensively addressed by historians: Hollander (1988) studied *Political Pilgrims*, others analysed several Italian cases dating from the same period as Conci's political career (Di Nucci 1988; Mariuzzo 2010).

Elsa Conci should not be considered precisely as a "political pilgrim", nor as an intellectual who was consciously devoted to the ideals and political values of the countries she visited, with a positive attitude towards them (Hollander 1988, 7). Hers were not "devotional journeys" like those depicted by Hollander, but rather professional journeys aimed at implementing her political plans: building the European construction and democracy in Italy. In some of her accounts, she praised the societies she visited, on the basis of real not contrived considerations: her prose was not emphatic and as she described the countries visited, she also highlighted the shortcomings and weaknesses of the Italian society and democracy – though without mentioning them (Hollander 1988, 49).

Conci did not seem to have remained entangled in the "techniques of hospitality", nor captured in the works of propaganda (Hollander 1988, 43-48).

Comparison materialises in readers' eyes and mind almost naturally in the stream of descriptions. In her writings, the author deliberately chose a comparative perspective, although not to prove the superiority of one society over the other, but rather to foster transformation and political education.

During one of her journeys, Conci travelled beyond the Iron Curtain when she visited East Berlin. Like many Italian journalists of that time, she used her account of this travel as the most appropriate means to depict the stark contrast between fast-growing Western countries and stagnating Eastern Communist countries: she shared Gino De Sanctis' view – stated in an article in the Italian daily newspaper *Messaggero* in 1953 – that East Berlin was "one city, two worlds" (Mariuzzo 2010, 261-262). In a placid and well-drafted narrative prose, through snapshots of daily life, the author sketched the picture of a Communist country oppressed by dictatorship and despotism, as was common practice in many contemporary newspapers and magazines engaged in the fight against Communism (Mariuzzo 2010, 132-137). By merging these evocative echoes from beyond the Iron Curtain and the polemic language of anti-Communism, the author was clearly able to emphasise those aspects of life that Italians would have experienced if the Italian Communist Party (*N.d.T.* Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) had won the elections (Mariuzzo 2010, 139).

The analysis of Conci's press articles will therefore highlight her personal political style as well as the way in which she used comparison in politics.

*The European Women's Union: a hotbed of comparison with a political and social scope*

The European Women's Union was a European organisation of Christian Democratic women's movements that aimed to investigate the prospects that were opening for women in the European arena at that time and defend the moral values of democracy (Savio 1959). It was established between 1952 and 1953 on the initiative of women from the Austrian People's Party who invited their female colleagues from other European Christian Democratic parties to meet in Salzburg in order to lay the foundations of a new association. In a press article published in a magazine called *Donne d'Italia*, Maria Jervolino summarised the main goals set during that meeting:

La riunione di Salisburgo (...) è stata di una notevole forza orientatrice verso un lavoro sociale in comune, che renda l'idea e l'attuazione di una Europa unita, più comprensibile al popolo, più passibile di essere veramente realizzata e vissuta, non solo dalle élites politiche, ma da quelle energie popolari che sono la forza perenne e vitale di ogni struttura politica (Jervolino 1953, 3)<sup>1</sup>.

«Le prime a delinearne i compiti e gli obiettivi (dell'Unione Femminile Europea) sono state l'austriaca Lola Solar e l'italiana Elisabetta Conci. L'incontro di Salisburgo fu importante, perché furono enunciati principi e programmi e non soltanto idee vaghe e approssimative; e fu raggiunta la ferma decisione di lavorare in concreto per una Unione bene organizzata con chiare responsabilità» (*A Vienna* 1965, 6)<sup>2</sup>.

In 1958, the European Women's Union was granted "Status B" at the Council of Europe (Conci 1964A, 527-528). This meant that the Union was an advisory member of the Council and was entitled to take part in Committees' meetings at which it could suggest its recommendations and submit its studies. Some women who had joined the Union were elected deputies of the European Parliamentary Assembly (created in 1958), others were members of the Council of Europe (Di Maio 2010, 198-199).

In her first speech as a national delegate of the Women's Movement, in 1956, Elsa Conci described the history and purpose of the European Women's Union, emphasising how useful comparison is to solve common problems, and stressing the need to know each other in order to avoid any misunderstanding. Comparison – which arises from the meeting of and exchange between European Christian Democratic women – highlights similarities and makes it possible to increase and deepen one's knowledge. As Conci underlined, comparison drives improvement. In other words, she thought that using comparison for political and social purposes could improve

<sup>1</sup> «The meeting in Salzburg [...] has been a remarkable spur towards joint social efforts aimed at making the idea and implementation of united Europe more intelligible to people, and easier to be truly carried out and experienced by political elites as well as by popular proactive groups, which are the ever-lasting and vital force of any political organisation» (Jervolino 1953, 3).

<sup>2</sup> «The first ones who defined the tasks and objectives (of the European Women's Union) were Lola Solar and Elisabetta Conci, respectively from Austria and Italy. The meeting in Salzburg was important because it laid down principles and programmes rather than just vague and general ideas; attendees also made a firm decision to work pragmatically towards a well-organised Union with clear responsibilities» (*A Vienna* 1965, 6).

the situation of each country, as well as women's status.

Nel novembre del '54 ad Innsbruck, nel gennaio del '55 a Basilea vi fu una lunga elaborazione per la costituzione dell'Unione Femminile Europea e finalmente nel settembre del '55 all'Aja si è regolarmente costituita. Questa Unione si propone lo studio dei problemi femminili. Le donne si trovano generalmente nella stessa situazione di fronte agli stessi scottanti problemi e sono impegnate nella stessa difficile lotta sia in Italia, sia in Germania, sia in Scandinavia. È molto costruttivo sentire ciò che fanno gli altri. L'Unione Femminile Europea si propone l'obiettivo di lavorare e di impegnarsi energicamente per diffondere e propagare nel nostro paese la libertà. Noi donne ci siamo proposte un lavoro tenace che speriamo porti i suoi frutti. All'Aja è stata eletta la direzione e sono state nominate le commissioni. (...) Della commissione per i problemi internazionali, presieduta dalla Sig.ra Emmelt, ho fatto parte anch'io.

Nel luglio del '56 vi fu a Londra la riunione della Direzione del Consiglio e si decise di tenere l'Assemblea Generale di queste rappresentanze nel 1957 a Strasburgo, per discutere i problemi della Unità Europea, della stampa, della propaganda ad attuare il consolidamento di quest'unione. Anche a Londra, in una Assemblea pubblica, abbiamo potuto parlare della situazione italiana; come si interessano dei problemi italiani, ma come non li conoscono! (Conci 1956A, 284-285)<sup>3</sup>.

The fact that comparison drives improvement was also emphasised by Stefania Rossi – a colleague and assistant of Elsa Conci's – as she came back from Strasbourg where she had attended the second general meeting of the European Women's Union in 1957. In her opinion too, the improvement effect originates from similarities and differences of legislation between several European countries, in that this comparison stimulates new reflections and encourages political action.

Noi italiane, se nelle idee ci sentiamo, diremmo quasi all'avanguardia, per le leggi che ci sono da noi non abbiamo molto da dire, e qualche cosa forse più delle altre da deplorare. Le leggi che regolano il diritto familiare, per esempio, possono essere migliorate, o meglio possono ispirarsi un po' di più ad una concezione personalistica della donna; così tutto il settore che riguarda il lavoro, la sicurezza sociale, l'istruzione e la qualificazione professionale delle donne. È vero, noi abbiamo in Italia una legislazione che non ammette il divorzio, e questo senza dubbio è un notevolissimo punto di vantaggio sulle altre legislazioni europee; ma d'altra parte c'è nella nostra legge l'ipocrita implicita ammissione della liceità dell'adulterio per il marito; e abbiamo giacente da dieci anni alle Camere il progetto di abolizione della regolamentazione

<sup>3</sup> «In November 1954 in Innsbruck, and then in January 1955 in Basel, there was a long debate and process leading to the creation of the European Women's Union, which was eventually duly established in 1955 in the Hague. This Union aims to probe into women's issues. Women are usually confronted with the same situations when facing the same pressing problems and they are engaged in the same challenging struggle, whether in Italy or Germany, or Scandinavia. Listening to what others do is very constructive. The European Women's Union aims to work and engage vigorously to spread and propagate freedom in our country. We have made a tenacious commitment that will hopefully bear fruit. Our leadership was elected in the Hague and several Committees were set up [...]. I have personally been a member of the Committee on international issues, chaired by Ms. Emmelt.

The Council's leadership met in London in July 1956 and decided to hold the General Meeting of representatives in 1957 in Strasbourg, to discuss problems related to European unity, the press, propaganda, as well as to strengthen the European Women's Union. When we were in London, at a public meeting, we had a chance to discuss the Italian case: there is much interest in Italy's problems but very few people are really familiar with them!» (Conci 1956A, 284-285).

della prostituzione. Non sono certo cose di cui noi, paese cattolico, possiamo vantarci (Rossi 1957)<sup>4</sup>.

At the third meeting of the European Women's Union – which was held in Berlin in 1959 –, Elsa Conci was elected president for her first two-year term. Emanuela Savio shortly reported this fact in *Donne d'Italia*, and described this organisation as a

movimento che chiede alle sue aderenti di approfondire sul piano europeo le tante prospettive che si aprono al mondo femminile di oggi, un mondo che sempre di più va inseguendosi nella vita politica e sociale dei singoli paesi aiutandone la costruzione democratica, migliorando le legislazioni scolastiche, familiari e sociali, rafforzando le libertà politiche, opponendo all'inerzia delle coscienze una vibrante difesa dei valori morali della democrazia (Savio 1959)<sup>5</sup>.

In her considerations, also Emanuela Savio stressed the improvement effect that results from the meeting of and exchange between European women. In particular, she listed the areas of comparison that are fostered by participation in the European Women's Union, emphasising the clear political and social purposes of comparison.

L'interessante scambio di esperienze nel settore della politica estera, nel campo dell'educazione (per una scuola che formi la coscienza europea) e della famiglia (la situazione giuridica della famiglia di oggi), nel settore del divertimento e dell'informazione (la stampa e la radio di oggi), nel mondo del lavoro (una miglior sicurezza sociale per i lavoratori), in quello economico (una giusta distribuzione della proprietà) hanno contribuito a formulare in modo più preciso e concreto i temi che l'Unione Europea Femminile affronterà nei prossimi mesi (Savio 1959)<sup>6</sup>.

What women who joined this organisation had in common was their wish to achieve European unity and a non-demanding conception of women (Di Maio 2010, 201).

At the fourth meeting of the European Women's Union – which was held in London in 1961 –, Elsa Conci was unanimously re-elected president of the Union for a second two-year term. Gemma Nardi Testa gave a report of the meeting, stressing a further

<sup>4</sup> «Italian women consider their ideas as fairly advanced, whilst their views on Italy's legislation are more critical than positive. Family law rules, for instance, might be improved, or, even better, they might be more inspired by a personalist conception of women. This applies to several areas related to women, such as employment, social security, education and vocational qualification. It is true that divorce is not permitted by Italy's legislation, which is undoubtedly a remarkable advantage compared to other European legal systems. What is hypocritical in our legislation, however, is that adultery committed by husbands is implicitly admitted as lawful. Moreover, the draft law on the abolition of the prostitution regulations has been pending before the House of Deputies and the Senate for ten years now. These are not aspects that a catholic country like Italy should be proud of» (Rossi 1957).

<sup>5</sup> «Movement that calls upon its female members to gain a better understanding of the many prospects that are opening up in Europe for today's women, who are entering more pervasively into the political and social areas of their respective countries, by supporting their democratic processes, by improving the legislation on education, family, and society, by strengthening political freedoms, and by countering the inaction of consciousness through a vibrant defence of the moral values of democracy» (Savio 1959).

<sup>6</sup> «The interesting exchange of experience in the fields of foreign politics, education (for education to shape European awareness), family (the legal status of today's family), entertainment and information (the press and radio today), employment (better social security for workers), economics (fair distribution of property) has helped define more accurately and pragmatically the topics that the European Women's Union will address in the next few months» (Savio 1959).

objective of the Union and comparison: understanding the international arena and promoting human solidarity. The purposes of comparison that stems from the meeting of and exchange between members of the European Women's Union are not only political and social, but also pertain to the spheres of interpretation and humanitarianism.

Sia attraverso regolari congressi, sia mediante uno scambio continuo di idee tramite le varie Commissioni permanenti, l'Unione intende stabilire una stretta comprensione internazionale favorita dalle conoscenze personali, dagli incontri, da tutto quel complesso di amicizie e simpatie che naturalmente si sviluppano attraverso contatti che vanno al di là dei confini nazionali (Nardi Testi 1961)<sup>7</sup>.

With the fifth meeting of the European Women's Union – which was held in Rome in 1963 –, Elsa Conci ended her term of office as President of the Union and did not reapply (Ricca 1963). In one of her articles, Gemma Nardi Testi clearly described the way in which the congress was organised including the inputs for reflection and comparison and, accordingly, the areas that were subject to comparative analysis:

I lavori si svolgeranno in due settori distinti: da un lato si avranno riunioni di Commissioni di studio, così organizzate: Commissione della famiglia; degli affari esteri; degli affari economici; dei problemi comunali; della radio e televisione; della stampa; dei problemi giuridici e dell'educazione; dall'altro in sede di Assemblea generale saranno trattati gli argomenti all'ordine del giorno che riflettono nelle loro linee fondamentali problemi di larga attualità, e precisamente: l'Unione Europea nei suoi presupposti storici e ideali; la Scuola Europea esaminata sotto il duplice aspetto delle esperienze passate e di un più ampio programma di sviluppo per l'avvenire; infine la situazione attuale dell'integrazione europea (Nardi Testi 1963)<sup>8</sup>.

Ms. Nardi Testi also explained the way in which comparison took place. The starting point was the identification of a common platform with the political purpose of implementing roadmaps that took into account the specific historical contexts of each country (Nardi Testi 1963).

After ten years of experience in the European Women's Union, Elsa Conci reviewed her concept of comparison and its potential benefits, and better defined its purposes. After ten years of international experience, she went beyond considering analogy as the only positive element and also beyond appreciating the sole aspects of comparison that might drive reform and improvement by making it possible to implement reforms or changes in Italy that would have improved the situation and fostered social transformation.

<sup>7</sup> «By means of regular conferences as well as ongoing exchange of views through its various standing Committees, the Union wishes to foster relevant understanding of the international arena, favoured by personal ties, meetings, and a network of mutual friendship and sympathy which grows naturally through contacts that go beyond domestic borders» (Nardi Testi 1961).

<sup>8</sup> «The conference will be organised in two distinct sessions. Committees will meet separately to address thematic issues: family, foreign affairs, economic affairs, municipal issues, radio and television, the press, legal issues, education. The plenary session of the General Meeting, instead, will deal with the items on the agenda, which will basically reflect some very topical issues, and precisely: the historical and ideal assumptions of the European Union; the European school of thought analysed from the perspective of both the past experience and a more wide-ranging development agenda for the future; lastly, the current situation of European integration» (Nardi Testi 1963).

After ten years of experience, she began to understand and appreciate the opportunity offered by comparison to interpret reality more thoroughly – as she stated – by emphasising its interpretation potential, that is what Robert Cowen currently defines as *reading the global* (Cowen 2006). Although Elsa Conci as a politician mostly appreciated the pragmatic effects of comparison, she later seemed to appreciate its hermeneutic benefits too. What persisted in her thought was the idea that comparison was a useful source of ideas to work out strategies of action aimed at achieving social and political goals: this concept has a long tradition (Bray 2009; Kazamias 2009).

Rilevante anche la nostra attività in seno alla Unione Femminile Europea. [...] L'incontro con donne politiche di altri Paesi, il dibattito su problemi comuni, la conoscenza di altre esperienze è certamente costruttivo al fine di una più ampia visione dei problemi politici e sociali (Conci 1961, 375-376)<sup>9</sup>.

In 1964, the European Women's Union was for Elsa Conci a hotbed of comparisons, juxtapositions, equalisations, benchmarking, which foster democratic thought and action, enrich one's mind with new content originating from others' experience, from the social and political achievements of other countries, thereby fostering a deeper and wider understanding of reality: comparison enables one to interpret things in a less superficial way. This form of comparison also proves to be useful for political purposes. Conci's thinking seemed to overcome the appreciation of the "analogical phase" of comparison when she experienced the transformative effects of the comparative approach:

Scambio di idee con popoli dalle tradizioni diverse, conoscenza delle esperienze altrui e delle realizzazioni e le conquiste sociali e politiche di vari paesi, rappresentano certamente ricchezza di contenuti nuovi e possibilità di più larga comprensione; particolarmente opportuno per quanto riguarda uno dei fatti più caratteristici del nostro tempo – e per noi interessanti in modo preminente – l'inserimento della donna nella vita pubblica.

Per queste ragioni ci sono sempre sembrati utili i contatti internazionali e (nel 1953) abbiamo aderito all'invito dell'Austria per un incontro a Salisburgo di donne attive nella vita politica, ispirantesi alla concezione democratica e cristiana.

Da quell'incontro scaturì l'Unione Femminile Europea costituitasi ufficialmente all'Aja nel 1955 e a cui diedero la propria adesione personalità politiche di numerosi paesi europei.

Noi partecipammo costantemente alla sua attività che si propone la diffusione dell'idea europea e lo studio, attraverso commissioni, dei problemi che maggiormente interessano il mondo femminile (famiglia, lavoro, previdenza, economia ecc.).

Fu davvero significativa la constatazione dell'analogia profonda di esperienze, delle difficoltà e lotte da superare, dei successi raggiunti, e delle somme di comuni interessi.

Gli incontri avvenuti di volta in volta in paesi diversi (dall'Inghilterra alla Germania, alla Svizzera, al Belgio, la Finlandia, la Francia, l'Austria, l'Olanda) hanno portato a conoscenza e comprensione reciproca, suscitando in tutti uno spirito veramente europeo, un impulso a lavorare per l'unificazione d'Europa (Conci 1964B)<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> «Our work at the European Women's Union is also relevant. [...] Meeting women in politics from other countries, discussing common problems, learning about other cases is no doubt a constructive input to take a wider view of political and social issues» (Conci 1961, 375-376).

<sup>10</sup> «Exchanging views with people of different traditions, knowing about others' experience and about the social

*The educational benefits of increasing awareness of the European Women's Union*

From 1955 to 1959, all the articles by Elsa Conci in *Donne d'Italia* dealt with Europe and the work of the European Women's Union. It should be noted that during the second parliamentary term – from 1954 al 1958 – Ms. Conci was appointed representative of the House of Deputies to the advisory assembly of the Council of Europe<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, from 1954 to 1964, she was a national delegate of the Christian Democratic Women's Movement (Dau Novelli 1988). By electing her, it seems as if the Women's Movement wished to respond to Alcide De Gasperi's call for women to show greater interest in international issues. As a matter of fact, in his message sent to Ms. Jervolino in May 1954 – on the eve of Conci's election – De Gasperi had dwelt on women's role in national and international politics. With regard to women's role in international politics, De Gasperi had particularly focused on two points that he considered as crucial for the promotion of peace and the construction of Europe as well as appropriate for women: developing a "sense of unity" and "co-operation and mutual control" between European nations. In his opinion, also women should have taken an interest in international issues: by now, these issues «entrano nella nostra vita e saranno tormento quotidiano per i nostri figli»<sup>12</sup> (De Gasperi 1954, 246-247).

From 1954 to 1959, Conci's commitment to the cause of Europe and her commitment to educating and training women in politics were crucial in her life: her pro-European ideals followed closely De Gasperi's line of thought, by which she was openly inspired. As a matter of fact, Elsa Conci considered that the Union of Europe responded to historical, political, and economic needs, and it reflected the urge for forms of unification that implemented the solidarity concept of christianism on the international scale (Di Maio 2010, 196). Her position in this regard is expressed very clearly in the unpublished text of a class she gave, probably in 1954, during a training

and political achievements of several countries are undoubtedly sources of new content and inputs for a broader understanding of reality. What seems particularly relevant with regard to one of the facts that typify our time – and are pre-eminently interesting to us – is the involvement of women in public life.

These are the reasons why international contacts have always seemed useful to us and (in 1953) we have accepted the invitation from Austria to hold a meeting in Salzburg, gathering women who work in politics and are inspired by Christian Democratic values and principles.

That meeting led to the creation of the European Women's Union, which was officially established in the Hague in 1955. Political leaders from many European countries joined the Union.

We have constantly been engaged in the EWU's work, which consists in spreading the concept of European unity, and studying the issues that mainly affect women by means of special Committees (on family, labour, social security, economics, and so on).

It was really remarkable to appreciate the significant similarities we had in terms of experience, difficulties, challenges, achievements, as well as our common interests.

Our meetings – which were held each time in a different country (England, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Finland, France, Austria, the Netherlands) – led to mutual knowledge and understanding, enhancing in all of us a truly European mindset, and urging us to work for the unification of Europe» (Conci 1964B).

<sup>11</sup> <http://storia.camera.it/organi/rappresentanza-della-camera-all-assemblea-consultiva-del-consiglio-d-europa-02#nav>

<sup>12</sup> «have become part of our lives and will burden our children on a daily basis».

course on politics for young Christian Democratic women (Conci 1954). In that lesson, Elsa Conci accurately and skilfully explained to women the practical steps that had been accomplished towards the unification of Europe:

1. the setting up of the Council of Europe, «del quale fanno parte tutti i paesi dell'Europa Occidentale e che ha però solo carattere consultivo. Non rappresenta quindi una soluzione del problema d'unificazione europea, che esige anche sul piano giuridico un superamento delle strutture nazionali»<sup>13</sup>;
2. some economic and diplomatic agreements «che eliminando cause di contrasti tra alcuni Paesi, oppure stabilendo rapporti di cooperazione politica ed economica, hanno contribuito ad aumentare la possibilità di una solidarietà europea. Per es. Accordo del Benelux (...); Unione doganale italo-francese; Accordo italo-austriaco -De Gasperi-Gruber»<sup>14</sup>;
3. the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation;
4. the European coal and steel pool (the Schuman plan), which «implica la soppressione delle barriere doganali che ostacolano la circolazione del carbone e dell'acciaio tra i sei paesi, così da conseguire un aumento della produzione a prezzi più giusti, grazie alla creazione di un mercato comune»<sup>15</sup>;
5. the European Defence Community, a plan for a European army submitted on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1950, which was shortly later blocked by the contrary vote of the French National Assembly (Conci 1954).

Elsa Conci seemed to be familiar with the weaknesses of some European nations: the long-term animosity between France and Germany; the poor support of Britain to the plans for a European union, owing to the fact that Britain was linked to the Commonwealth and, therefore, it did not act solely in pursuit of its national and European interests; the immoderate nationalism of Germany and Italy, which, in the long run, harms the true interests of a nation (Conci 1954). Despite her realistic knowledge of the political arena, she did not retreat in the face of hindrances along the way towards unification. Her confidence in the viability of the European ideal seemed unwavering. However, what was missing, in her opinion, was (quoting De Gasperi): «un organo parlamentare eletto in comune e realmente deliberante» (Conci 1954)<sup>16</sup>. Long before she joined the European Women's Union, Elsa Conci had given evidence of her in-depth knowledge of problems and her firm political will to unify the old continent.

The first General Meeting of the European Women's Union was held in the Hague (the Netherlands) in 1955. Memories of that first meeting are to be found in an article

<sup>13</sup> «of which all Western European countries are members and which only has advisory status. It cannot therefore be considered as a solution to the European unification issue, which demands that a supra-national level be established also from the legal point of view».

<sup>14</sup> «that have unrooted the causes of clash between some countries or have established relations based on political and economic cooperation, thereby helping promote European solidarity. For instance, the Benelux Agreement [...]; the Customs Union Agreement between Italy and France; the Gruber-De Gasperi Agreement between Italy and Austria».

<sup>15</sup> «implies the removal of customs barriers that hinder the trade of coal and steel between six countries, resulting in an increase in production at fairer prices, thanks to the establishment of a common market».

<sup>16</sup> «a fully deliberative parliament elected by all countries» (Conci 1954).

by Elsa Conci (Conci 1955A, 9) appeared in *Donne d'Italia*. In that short writing, comparison is described as something positive – hence useful in politics – but also complex. It is interesting to notice the result of this comparison process: the love for one's homeland broadening towards a wider horizon.

Qui ci riunimmo, anche noi, venute dall'Italia, l'Austria, la Svizzera, la Francia, il Belgio, la Germania, l'Inghilterra e la Finlandia con le Olandesi per discutere i nostri problemi e consolidare la nostra amicizia nello spirito europeo.

[...] Diverse le esperienze, diversi gli obiettivi raggiunti, diversi i sistemi di organizzazione e di lavoro; vi era accanto alla svizzera che non ha ancora ottenuto il diritto di voto e chiede con ansia consigli e con profondo interesse informazioni, l'inglese maturata nell'esercizio dei doveri di un'antica democrazia; ma quanti problemi egualmente gravi per tutte, quante difficoltà che tutte conoscono, quante lotte che tutte devono sostenere!

Nella solidarietà che sentimmo viva tra noi ci sembrò trovare nuovo vigore; decidemmo di approfondire i problemi attraverso commissioni istituite per lo studio, mettendo a frutto le esperienze di ognuna; ma ciò che si manifestò con evidenza maggiore fu un sentimento nuovo: l'amore al nostro paese si potenziava e allargava in un orizzonte più vasto, sentivamo pur nelle divergenze spesso profonde, un legame che tutte ci univa: l'Europa (Conci 1955A, 9)<sup>17</sup>.

In the same article (Conci 1955A), before referring to the first general meeting of the European Women's Union (without naming it), Elsa Conci described the Netherlands, from a naturalistic perspective first (grasslands, flowers, woods) and then from a civil point of view. This country «dà l'impressione di un generale benessere, di vita laboriosa e serena»<sup>18</sup>. She described the magnificent Zuiderzee works for the construction of a colossal system of dikes to dam and reclaim the Zuiderzee bay, thus obtaining fertile land and the opportunity to build new cities. The Netherlands are described as «un paese dove il popolo combatte giorno per giorno indomito e tenace la dura battaglia contro quel pauroso colosso che è il mare, sa infondere coraggio per le iniziative più ardite»<sup>19</sup>. These descriptions, in my opinion, initiated Italian female readers into learning about new worlds, thus encouraging an inevitable though indirect comparison with the situation in Italy.

The same approach was used by Elsa Conci (Conci 1955B) in a later article appeared in *Donne d'Italia*, in which she described the feeling of sadness in East Berlin.

<sup>17</sup> «We came from Italy, Austria, Switzerland, France, Belgium, Germany, England, and Finland to meet here with the Dutch and discuss our problems and tighten our friendship in a European spirit. (...) We had different experiences, different goals attained, different organisation and labour systems. There was Switzerland – which had not obtained voting right yet and was eager to ask for advice and very interested in getting information – next to Britain, a long-standing democracy which had grown in the exercise of its duties. And yet we shared so many common and equally severe problems, so many difficulties to be faced, so many struggles to undergo!

The vivid solidarity that we felt among us infused new vigour in us. We decided to investigate a number of issues by setting up special committees for study purposes, by drawing on the experience gained by each of us. However, a new feeling came up with greater emphasis: our love for our respective homelands was becoming stronger and was broadening towards a wider horizon. Despite our often deep-seated differences, we felt a common connection between us all: Europe» (Conci 1955A, 9).

<sup>18</sup> «seems to enjoy general well-being, peaceful and laborious life».

<sup>19</sup> «a country where the population fights indomitably and tenaciously on a daily basis its difficult struggle against a scary giant – the sea – and is capable of instilling the courage to face the most daring challenges».

In that short article – without referring to any specific professional engagement nor public event for which she undertook this journey –, she used short sketches to depict briefly the difference between the two halves of Berlin: the East part – on which she dwelt longer – and the West part. As you enter East Berlin, you find yourself straight away on the main boulevard called Stalin-allee, a road that is «vasta lunghissima con imponenti, mastodontici, uniformi edifici ai lati, che fanno l'impressione di immense, sia pure maestose, caserme»<sup>20</sup>. On this main road, there are «poche macchine frettolose, rari autobus mezzi vuoti, la gente passa quasi silenziosa; il grigiore cupo della strada si riflette nei volti»<sup>21</sup>. The only books sold in bookshops are those by Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. Shops do not sell any picture postcards and those who do, only display views of Moscow. Her encounter with a small group of kids in the street gave her a hint for describing the kind of education imparted to children and the situation of working women:

Un bisbiglio, piccoli passi marcati di marcia, un gruppo di bimbi tra i 3 e i 5 anni camminano ordinati intorno ad una donna dal viso arcigno. La ferrea legge dello Stato obbliga tutte le mamme al lavoro fuori casa per l'intera giornata e i loro piccoli sono affidati a funzionari statali (Conci 1955B)<sup>22</sup>.

Female readers are thus initiated into comparison and thinking by the description of the context. At the end of the article, Conci herself makes a comparison between East and West Berlin: what makes the difference between the two cities is the vibrancy of life and freedom.

Ritorniamo in occidente; col suo movimento, le sue luci, la sua attività febbrile, il viavai chiassoso della gente; Berlino-ovest ci appare immensamente bella.

E ci sentiamo di nuovo uomini liberi: mai come in quel momento abbiamo compreso l'infinito valore dell'insostituibile dono divino che è la nostra libertà (Conci 1955B)<sup>23</sup>.

In an article written in 1956, Conci dealt with the first meeting of the Council of the European Women's Union, which took place in London. In this text, she described Londoners' civic spirit and the operating mode of the newly-founded European Women's Union. As she arrived in London, Elsa Conci had the distinct feeling of being “in un mondo diverso dal nostro”<sup>24</sup> where democracy is deeply-rooted and civicness is very strong.

<sup>20</sup> «wide and extremely long, with imposing, gigantic, uniform buildings on both sides, which look like huge, though majestic, barracks».

<sup>21</sup> «few hasty cars, buses are half-empty and rare, people pass through almost in silence and their faces mirror the dark greyness of the road».

<sup>22</sup> «A whisper, small steps at a marching pace: a group of kids aged between 3 and 5 are walking neatly around a woman with a grim face. The strict laws of the State compel all mothers to work outside their homes all day long and their children are taken care of by Government officials» (Conci 1955B).

<sup>23</sup> «Let us go back to the Western world, with its liveliness, its lights, its hustle and bustle, the noisy coming and going of people. West Berlin looks tremendously beautiful. And you can feel free again: now more than ever, you do realise the infinite value of the irreplaceable divine gift of human freedom» (Conci 1955B).

<sup>24</sup> «in a different world from ours».

Tutto ti parla di un'antica democrazia sviluppata attraverso i secoli che non ha avuto bisogno per affermarsi e consolidarsi, di sconvolgere ciò che la tradizione aveva via via maturato [...].

Ma ciò che più impressiona forse è il profondo senso civico della popolazione: negli immensi parchi verdi dove la gente si muove liberamente, nelle vie e ovunque ogni cosa è rispettata: l'interesse dell'amministrazione civile è sentito naturalmente come l'interesse del singolo (Conci 1956B)<sup>25</sup>.

Also Londoners' way of working in Parliament seems to differ from Italians': here comparison is implicit. The peculiarity of the British also determines their reluctance to be involved in the work of European international bodies: this seems to explain current "Brexit".

Al Parlamento la discussione avviene concisa, concreta come uno scambio di vedute tra persone che, con opinioni diverse, tendono tutte allo stesso obiettivo: il bene della Patria. E anche se il contrasto a volte è vivace, è inconcepibile un'opposizione che ricorra a tutti i mezzi, ostruzionismo compreso, per ostacolare l'opera legislativa.

Ovunque spira aria di sufficienza e di benessere. Sembra veramente di comprendere la riluttanza quasi istintiva dell'inglese ad inserirsi negli organismi internazionali con i paesi del continente (Conci 1956B)<sup>26</sup>.

She then described the way of working within the European Women's Union:

Le commissioni avevano lavorato, raccogliendo dati, esperienze, comunicazioni dai vari movimenti femminili aderenti. Le relazioni delle rispettive presidenti dimostrano ancora una volta quanti problemi scottanti che riguardano la donna sono comuni a tutti i paesi, anche se situazioni diverse non mancano (Conci 1956B)<sup>27</sup>.

Conci listed the names of the representatives of all nations, thus sealing their acquaintance: Lola Solar, member of the Parliament of Vienna and president of the European Women's Union; Alison Tennant, vice-president of the European Women's Union; Madame Tonquet from Paris; Lisa Mäkinen from Finland; Ms. Sotorius from the Netherlands; Ms. Rosch, member of the Parliament of Bonn; Ms. Emmet, member of the Parliament of London. At the London meeting, these women decided to

<sup>25</sup> «Everything here relates to a long tradition of democracy that has been growing throughout centuries, with no need to upset the achievements of tradition to succeed and become established [...] What is more impressive, thought, is citizens' strong civicness: in the huge green areas where people walk freely, in the streets, and anywhere else, people show respect for everything: the public administration's interest is considered naturally as the interest of each individual» (Conci 1956B).

<sup>26</sup> «In Parliament, discussion is concise and pragmatic as an exchange of views between people who have different opinions but all work towards a common goal: the good of their homeland. Although the debate sometimes gets heated, it would be inconceivable for the opposition forces to use all available means, including obstructionism, to interfere with the progress of a legislative body.

Everywhere, you can breathe an air of self-sufficiency and well-being. You seem to really understand the almost instinctive reluctance of the British to be involved in the work of international bodies with continental European countries» (Conci 1956B).

<sup>27</sup> «Committees had worked collecting data, experience, communications from the various member women's movements. The reports by their respective presidents showed once again that all countries had so many hot problems regarding women in common, although there were also distinct situations» (Conci 1956B).

commit themselves «con vigore e con tenacia per sviluppare nei nostri paesi e nei nostri partiti la volontà di unione leale, reale, efficace, duratura tra i popoli liberi d'Europa»<sup>28</sup>. In London, in 1956, these women decided that the next general meeting would be held in Strasbourg in September 1957 on the following topic: the support that women can give to European unification. This support relies on research, action and, most of all, propaganda. As a consequence, they decided that the second keynote speech of the meeting would deal with mass media (radio, cinema, the press).

In 1957, Conci published two articles in *Donne d'Italia*, respectively on two journeys she made in Finland and Hamburg.

In 1957, Conci took part in the European Women's Union leadership meeting in Helsinki. On that occasion, she described Finland to her female readers. She initially sketched it from a social and cultural perspective, by carefully dispelling the common misconceptions of continental Europeans about this country:

Per l'europeo continentale la Finlandia è il paese delle renne, dei lapponi, degli sconfinati campi di ghiaccio, della notte boreale; ma la Lapponia è solo una regione nella parte più settentrionale oltre il circolo polare artico. Il resto della penisola ha un aspetto ben differente. Arrivando ad Helsinki rimani meravigliato di trovarti in una città modernissima che ha strade di un'ampiezza straordinaria, negozi ricchissimi, edifici sontuosi ed architettonici, lussuosi alberghi, movimento continuo – ma in periferia si estende fin dentro il bosco. Dappertutto, fiori specie tulipani coltivati in serre e piante verdi, anche nell'interno delle case. Freddo rigido, ma il calore degli ambienti non lo fa sentire (Conci 1957A)<sup>29</sup>.

Further down in the text, Conci described the Finns from a civil point of view, by first setting them in their historical context:

Popolo attivo ed intelligente, il popolo della Finlandia, estremamente fiero della sua indipendenza conquistata attraverso guerre continue e gelosamente salvaguardata sotto il dominio svedese e quello degli zar e, negli ultimi anni, difesa con lotte sanguinose contro la repubblica sovietica. [...] Quando nel 1944 dovettero cedere alla Russia la Karelia, tutti i 420 mila abitanti emigrarono dalla terra divenuta straniera e ritornarono in patria: non uno solo rimase al di là dal confine.

In pochi anni con il lavoro febbrile, bruciando i boschi perché la cenere fertilizzasse il terreno, sommovendo faticosamente le zolle con i trattori, costruendo le piccole case di legno che albergano ognuno una famiglia, tutti riuscirono a sistemarsi (Conci 1957A)<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> «with determination and tenacity, to develop in our countries and political parties the willingness to achieve loyal, real, effective, and lasting union between the free peoples of Europe».

<sup>29</sup> «To continental Europeans, Finland is the country of reindeer, the Lapp, boundless ice fields, and the Northern Lights; but Lapland is just a region in the northernmost part of the hemisphere, beyond the Arctic Circle. The rest of the peninsula looks very different. As you land in Helsinki, you surprisingly find yourself in a very modern city with extremely wide roads, shops with full ranges of products, sumptuous architectural buildings, luxury hotels, very busy streets – but in the outskirts, the city extends into the wood. There are flowers everywhere, especially tulips that are grown in green houses, and green plants, even inside the houses. Cold is bitter, but places are so warm that you cannot feel it» (Conci 1957A).

<sup>30</sup> «The Finns are active and smart people; they are extremely proud of their independence, conquered through continuous wars and jealously safeguarded under Swedish and tsars' rules and defended in the last few years at the cost of bloody fighting against the Soviet Republic. [...] When in 1944 Finland had to give up Karelia to Russia, all the 420 thousand inhabitants of the region migrated from that which had become a foreign land back to their

The Finns are defined as indomitable people who love their homeland and are eager to travel and visit other countries; a cultivated population who established compulsory schooling of a duration of no less than 8 years decades ago; a people of farmers and industrial manufacturers; a hospitable people. Last but not least, this is a democratic country where women were entitled to vote back in the beginning of the century:

Paese di antica democrazia, a suffragio universale di vecchia data, che riconobbe per primo in Europa il diritto di voto alle donne (già nel 1906). Da 50 anni ormai esse sono inserite quindi nella vita sociale, civica e politica. Gli uomini ne parlano con soddisfazione e spesso tessono l'elogio delle loro compagne senza esserne richiesti. Tu senti nelle donne la consapevolezza della loro forza e della loro responsabilità, maturata attraverso decenni. Sono numerose in parlamento, attive nei partiti (Conci 1957A)<sup>31</sup>.

Comparison with the situation in Italy comes naturally, even if it remains implicit: the Finns are partly similar to, but partly more advanced than Italians.

The reason for her journey to Helsinki was a meeting of the leadership of the European Women's Union. Leadership meetings took place each time in a different city and according to Elsa Conci, those were educational occasions that strengthened the bonds of friendship between female parliamentarians while also raising awareness of their common belonging to Europe:

La direzione dell'Unione Femminile Europea volle riunirsi quest'anno ad Helsinki. Ogni volta essa organizza i suoi incontri in un'altra città: passo da Vienna a Salisburgo, a Basilea, a Monaco di Baviera, a Londra e finalmente in Finlandia. È interessante ed istruttivo e serve in modo meraviglioso a rinsaldare i vincoli reciproci questa conoscenza diretta di popoli e paesi, questo contatto umano che affratella, questo sentirsi vicini l'uno all'altro, nonostante le lontananze, e membri della stessa grande famiglia anche se lingua, usi e costumi sono diversi. Non è illusione, ma un fatto concreto: la nostra antica civiltà europea ha lasciato profonde tracce comuni nei popoli ovunque. Sapessero essi farne tesoro! (Conci 1957A)<sup>32</sup>.

Again in 1957, she wrote a second article on the city of Hamburg, one of the most important port cities in Germany. The city is connected to the North Sea by the Elbe

homeland: not a single citizen remained beyond the boundary.

In just few years, they all managed to settle down working hard, burning woods so that the ashes fertilized the land, struggling to break the clods and till the soil with tractors, building small wooden houses to shelter their families» (Conci 1957A).

<sup>31</sup> «This is a country with a long tradition of democracy, where universal suffrage was established ages ago, and it was the first in Europe to grant women voting right (back in 1906). For 50 years now, women have been involved in social, civil and political life. Men are proud of it and they often praise their wives and partners without being asked to. You can feel women's empowerment, which has grown stronger and stronger over decades. There are many women in Parliament and they are actively involved in political parties» (Conci 1957A).

<sup>32</sup> «The leadership of the European Women's Union decided they would meet in Helsinki this year. They meet each year in a different city: I have visited Vienna, Salzburg, Basel, Munich, London and, eventually, Finland. This is interesting and educational. This human contact that brings us together, this feeling closer to one another despite our distances and members of the same big family despite our different languages, customs and traditions is something extremely useful to strengthen the mutual bonds of friendship between our peoples and countries. This is not an illusion, but a real fact: our old European civilisation has left deep common roots among our peoples everywhere. I hope they can build on this treasure!» (Conci 1957A).

river. During World War II, Hamburg was destroyed by the Anglo-American armed forces in the dreadful bombing of 28<sup>th</sup> July 1943 that caused dozens of thousands of casualties among civilians as well as very severe and extensive damage to buildings and infrastructure, thereby reducing drastically the city's labour, industrial, and economic potential. In her article, Elsa Conci (Conci 1957B) did not mention the reasons for her journey in Hamburg. She highlighted the astonishing reconstruction work accomplished by the population in just fourteen years.

Quello che sbalordisce [...] è l'opera di gigantesca ricostruzione compiuta dopo la strage della guerra passata.

Quando ti raccontano, ancora rabbrivendo, dei bombardamenti furiosi, degli incendi che hanno ucciso in poche notti 55.000 persone e ti descrivono quel campo di macerie che era divenuta la città e il groviglio pauroso di macchine, navi e mercanzie distrutte che ingombravano e annientavano il porto, ti chiedi meravigliato: – Come è stato possibile ricostruire tutto in così pochi anni? (Conci 1957B, 9)<sup>33</sup>.

In Conci's view, two elements influenced that successful reconstruction: the capabilities of free people and the atmosphere of democratic freedom. In her opinion, these two factors were crucial in all countries confronted with reconstruction after the war, including Italy.

Era Amburgo l'immagine della morte.

Oggi la città è divenuta più grande (circa 2 milioni di abitanti), più viva, più attiva, più maestosa di prima. Fabbriche, industrie, magazzini ricchissimi, vetrine eleganti, movimento ininterrotto di persone e di macchine [...].

Marinai, operai, ingegneri, impiegati a migliaia sono all'opera ovunque. È uno spettacolo grandioso che non puoi dimenticare e ti dice la forza conquistatrice dell'uomo libero che in clima sinceramente democratico, consapevole della dignità e della potenza della persona umana, della nobiltà del lavoro e del sacrificio, con volontà indomita e spirito rivolto al bene comune, sa superare ogni ostacolo e dalle rovine crea vita nuova.

Questa la lezione che Amburgo ci incide nella mente e nel cuore (Conci 1957B, 9-10)<sup>34</sup>.

In 1958, Conci was re-elected national delegate of the Women's Movement and published three short articles in *Donne d'Italia* on the unification of Europe and women's role to this end. These writings confirmed her loyalty and that of the Women's Movement to De Gasperi's pro-European line of thought.

<sup>33</sup> «What is astonishing [...] is the gigantic reconstruction work accomplished after the massacre of the past war. When the inhabitants – still shivering – tell you about the furious bombing, the fires that killed 55,000 people in just few nights, and when they describe the city as a rubble field and the awful tangle of destroyed vehicles, ships, and wares that blocked the port and caused it to fall into disuse, you ask yourself in wonder: “how was it possible to reconstruct everything in so few years?» (Conci 1957B, 9).

<sup>34</sup> «Hamburg was the image of death. Today, the city has become bigger (with some 2 million inhabitants), more lively, active, and magnificent than before. Factories, manufacturing sites, well-stocked stores, elegant shop windows, hustle and bustle of people and cars. [...] There are thousands of employed seamen, workers, and engineers working everywhere. It is so unforgettable and impressive to see, as it shows the conquering power of free people who can overcome any obstacle and generate new life from wreckage in a truly democratic atmosphere, being aware of the dignity and power of humankind, the nobility of work and sacrifice, with indomitable will and commitment for the common good. This is the lesson that Hamburg has engraved in our minds and souls» (Conci 1957B, 9-10).

In her first article (Conci 1958A), she explained the reason that urged her to support all the initiatives aimed at unifying Europe, in the three political domains in which she was engaged: the Council of Europe, the European Women's Union, and the Italian Parliament. The grounds for her engagement are to be found in De Gasperi's last speech, delivered on 27<sup>th</sup> June 1954 at San Carlo's Theatre in Naples on the occasion of the 5<sup>th</sup> National Congress of Christian Democrats (Bozza 1956, 271-316). In his paper, the statesman maintained that solidarity between peoples, which means integration into the international community, was crucial for the development of individual countries: this principle acted as a spring that spurred Elsa Conci to become committed to European unity with vigour and expertise (Conci 1958A).

Elsa Conci considered solidarity as a typical women's attitude, but also as the *raison d'être* of the European Women's Union. Moreover, she could already see a glimpse of success in the European unification efforts undertaken, while maintaining that the setting up of a European parliament with decision-making power was crucial for unification to be truly achieved.

Forse è un atteggiamento caratteristico della mentalità femminile la comprensione e l'attrazione viva per tutto ciò che significa umana solidarietà; certo abbiamo sempre creduto che la pace tra i popoli e l'azione concorde nell'interesse comune siano condizione fondamentale per un migliore avvenire della società umana.

[...] Quando più tardi costituimmo all'Aja l'Unione femminile europea, l'obiettivo che ci proponemmo non era solo l'approfondimento di specifici problemi sfruttando le esperienze dei vari paesi, ma in modo particolare la volontà di unire i nostri sforzi per dare un costruttivo contributo all'unificazione d'Europa.

Importanti tappe sono state raggiunte; il mercato comune e l'Euratom aprono prospettive di notevole sviluppo economico, (i risultati ottenuti dalle comunità del carbone e dell'acciaio lo stanno a dimostrare), gli scambi culturali tra i paesi europei allargano l'orizzonte della nostra cultura su un vasto piano internazionale (Conci 1958A)<sup>35</sup>.

Elsa Conci was committed to establishing a decision-making European parliament by urging public opinion to accept the election of parliament representatives by direct universal suffrage: according to Conci, this democratic process – which would have entailed a loss of national sovereignty – gave full effect to Article 11 of the Constitution of the Republic of Italy<sup>36</sup>:

<sup>35</sup> «Understanding and strong attraction to everything that is related to human solidarity may be a typical women's attitude. Of course, we have always believed that peace among peoples and acting unanimously were the prerequisites for a better future of human society.

[...] Later on, when we founded the European Women's Union in the Hague, the goal we set for ourselves was not only to study specific issues by building on the experience of various countries, but more specifically to join our forces in order to give our constructive support to the unification of Europe.

Significant milestones have been achieved: the common market and Euratom have opened prospects for remarkable economic growth (the results attained by the coal and steel communities are evidence of this); the cultural exchange between European countries has extended our cultural horizon to a wider international scale» (Conci 1958A).

<sup>36</sup> «Italy rejects war as an instrument of aggression against the freedom of other peoples and as a means for settling international disputes: on equal conditions, it agrees to limit its sovereignty in order to ensure a system that guarantees peace and justice among Nations; it promotes and encourages international organizations having such ends in view» *Constitution of the Republic of Italy* (1947), Article 11.

La comunità veramente operante tra i popoli d'Europa sarà un fatto compiuto e la pace davvero assicurata solo quando la costituzione di un parlamento europeo, con potere deliberativo, porterà al comune dibattito politico e alla fattiva intesa tra i singoli governi.

A questo fine abbiamo iniziato una tenace opera di propaganda per suscitare e ravvivare l'interesse dell'opinione pubblica all'importantissimo problema e per rendere possibile – appena i tempi saranno maturi – l'elezione a suffragio diretto dei rappresentanti all'assemblea comune perché l'impegno sia avvalorato e l'articolo 11 della nostra costituzione abbia la sua piena applicazione, nello spirito altamente democratico con cui è stato concepito dalla costituente (Conci 1958A)<sup>37</sup>.

In a later article written in 1958, Elsa Conci reported to her readers the feelings and reflections aroused by her participation in the Congress of the German Christian Democratic Party (CDU), held in the city of Kiel.

To her, the unification of Europe seemed to be the key topic of the congress (Conci 1958B): this was stressed firmly and unanimously by all participants, who also stated that in order to accomplish this plan, it was necessary for Eastern and Western Germany to be reunited. The unification of Europe was also the goal that 82-year-old Chancellor Adenauer – a man who had been persecuted by the Nazis and initially left out by the Allied Powers – aimed to achieve with his “unquenchable determination”.

The second focus highlighted by Conci was the central role of a vital ganglion of all newly-formed post-war States: the full implementation of social law by the State and the exercise of freedom and personal responsibility by citizens. The commitment of both the State and citizens – which had been emphasised during the German congress – were equally necessary in Italy. Here too, comparison is stimulated but not explicitly brought out.

Compito preminente dell'ora: il consolidamento dello stato democratico nell'attuazione integrale del diritto sociale [...].

Fu il Dott. Gerstenmaier, Presidente della Camera dei Deputati, che svolse il tema, seguito poi da un interessante dibattito. Lo Stato per la Germania democratica, è fondato sulla libertà e sull'autoresponsabilità del singolo cittadino. Quindi sulla libera iniziativa, ma lotta del governo al monopolio e ai cartelli; autodeterminazione e autosufficienza, ma intervento statale per chi è nell'impossibilità assoluta di provvedere da sé: l'invalido, l'anormale, l'incapace al lavoro; in tutti gli altri casi l'assistenza statale è solo sussidiaria; accettazione del piano verde per l'agricoltura, perché è necessario nell'attuale congiuntura economica che lo stato intervenga per salvare il mondo contadino; dovere assoluto dell'uomo politico di operare al di sopra di esigenze di singole categorie, nella comprensione dell'interesse dell'intero Paese (Conci 1958B)<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> «A truly operating community among the peoples of Europe will be accomplished and peace will be really secured only when a European parliament with decision-making power is established, thus leading to a common political debate and factual agreement among our respective governments.

To this end, we have engaged in a tenacious propaganda exercise in order to elicit and rekindle public opinion's interest in this crucial issue and in order to make it possible – when the time is right – to elect the representatives of Parliament by direct suffrage for the commitment assumed to be endorsed and for Article 11 of our Constitution to be fully implemented, following the highly democratic spirit in which it was designed by our Constituent Assembly” (Conci 1958A).

<sup>38</sup> «Our prominent mission at present consists in strengthening the democratic State in the full implementation

The last paper written by Elsa Conci in 1958 was a speech that she delivered at the conference of European democratic women. She wondered which particular support women should give to the consolidation of democracy, being aware that «consolidare la democrazia non è certo compito esclusivo della donna»<sup>39</sup> (Conci 1958C). Conci stated that women should act by capitalising on both their brains and hearts. They should not just be driven by their typical maternal instinct. Instead, they should develop competences in every field, in order to be capable of effectively supporting the consolidation of democracy. The women's profile that is outlined here seems broader than the usual wife/mother stereotype, although women must demonstrate their skills to deserve this new profile.

Veramente la donna – se crede nella propria vocazione – sa sanare tante piaghe, lenire dolori, combattere ostacoli e difficoltà, superare contrasti, conciliare, unire, animare. Per il senso materno che le contraddistingue, le donne di tutti i paesi sanno parlare, se vogliono, la stessa lingua e possono intendersi. Noi donne della libera Europa, credenti negli stessi ideali, dovunque ci siamo incontrate, abbiamo saputo raggiungere, sia pure dopo discussione approfondita, la più cordiale intesa.

Ma non basta oggi per un'azione efficace la volontà decisa e la più assoluta dedizione: occorre competenza. La donna deve acquisirla in tutti i campi, sociale, politico, culturale, scientifico, con lo studio e l'indagine individuale; se vuole esercitare influenza benefica nell'ambiente in cui vive e lavora: la famiglia, il partito, il consiglio comunale, il Parlamento, deve conoscere e approfondire tutti i problemi. Soltanto così essa potrà contribuire al consolidamento della democrazia nel proprio Paese e nella più vasta comunità internazionale (Conci 1958C)<sup>40</sup>.

In 1958, Elsa Conci became Director of the magazine called *Donne d'Italia*. In November of the same year, she was elected national delegate of the Women's Movement for the second time ("L'on. Elsa Conci rieletta Delegata Nazionale del Movi-

of social law. [...] Mr. Gerstenmaier, President of the House of Deputies, delivered a speech on this topic, which was followed by an interesting debate. The State, in the German Democratic Republic, is founded on individual citizens' freedom and personal responsibility, hence on free enterprise, but the Government combats monopolies and cartels. Self-determination and self-sufficiency are fostered, but the State intervenes to help those who cannot absolutely provide for themselves: the disabled, people who are unfit for work or affected by abnormalities. In all other cases, the Welfare State only intervenes on a subsidiary basis. The State has endorsed the green plan for agriculture because it needs to intervene to help the farming community in the present economic cycle. Politicians have an absolute duty to stand above the interests of individual groups, and work in the interest of the whole country» (Conci 1958B).

<sup>39</sup> «strengthening democracy is by no means the exclusive mission of women».

<sup>40</sup> «Indeed women – if they believe in their vocation – are capable of healing so many wounds, relieving pain, combating difficulties and obstacles, overcoming conflicts, reconciling, uniting, loving. Thanks to their typical maternal instinct, women from all countries of the world can speak the same language – if they wish to – and can understand one another.

We are women from free Europe who believe in the same ideals and wherever we have met, our thorough debates have always ended in friendly agreement.

Today, however, determined will and the utmost dedication are not enough to be effective in action: you need skills. Women must become skilled in every (social, political, cultural, scientific) field, through learning and personal investigation. If they want to exert benign influence in their working and living environments – i.e., family, political parties, municipal councils, Parliament – they should learn about and investigate all problems. This is the only way for them to be able to support the consolidation of democracy in their respective countries and the larger international community» (Conci 1958C).

mento Femminile”, 1958). In 1959, Ms. Conci was elected president of the European Women’s Union. The articles she personally wrote or other journalists wrote about her in *Donne d’Italia* in 1959 mentioned both areas of interest – i.e. her national interests as member of the Parliament, magazine Director and President of the Christian Democratic Women’s, and her European interests.

Conci’s articles in *Donne d’Italia* from 1960 to 1964, instead, are all about the Italian situation, except the last one that dealt with the European Women’s Union. That was a major article that would have opened a new season, unless death had befallen her 1965.

The articles dating to 1959 will be analysed here, not the one appeared in 1964, which has been already considered in the beginning of this paper.

In 1959, three articles by Elsa Conci were published. One concerned summer training courses on politics for women (Conci 1959A). This article will not be described here because it forms part of her work related to the Women’s Movement, which will be covered in a separate paper. The other two articles seem to be more relevant to the subject of this study.

One of the two articles dealt with the tenth anniversary of the Council of Europe (Conci 1959B). In that text, you can find Conci’s unshakable confidence in the unification of Europe, despite all difficulties.

L’unificazione d’Europa fu l’assillo dei popoli, usciti straziati dall’ultima guerra. Ma se in una stessa nazione [...] non è facile raggiungere un’intesa, le difficoltà aumentano enormemente in un consesso internazionale. [...] Eppure [...] avvertimmo che era possibile un lavoro comune: la convinzione che unire l’Europa era condizione di vita per il vecchio Continente ci accomunava. [...] Nonostante le inevitabili deficienze e la sua lentezza il Consiglio d’Europa è stato ed è strumento efficacissimo di unione (Conci, 1959B)<sup>41</sup>.

The last article (Conci, 1959C) covered here seems very relevant. Elsa Conci introduced herself to readers as the new director of the magazine and explained her line of conduct. In other words, she explained what she meant to do through this press service, while also describing what she had already done in her past articles in the same magazine. She wished *Donne d’Italia* to be an educational magazine.

Da molte parti è stata espressa l’esigenza viva di un giornale formativo che approfondisca, come abbiamo scritto nella nostra lettera di gennaio, «i motivi della presenza viva della donna nella società italiana per individuarne i problemi e gli aspetti, per cercarne ed indicare i mezzi ed i metodi di soluzione» e ci è sembrato risponda a questa esigenza parlare di argomenti attuali, di fatti, di avvenimenti che ci interessano, per formarci un giudizio aderente alla realtà storica nella quale viviamo, per prepararci a collaborare fattivamente alla soluzione dei problemi che travagliano la società umana (Conci 1959C)<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> «The unification of Europe was the constant worry of war-torn peoples. If it is not easy to reach agreement in one nation [...], difficulties are even stronger in an international context. [...] And yet [...], we realised that it was possible to work jointly: our common belief was that uniting Europe was a prerequisite for the survival of the old Continent [...] Despite its inevitable deficiencies and slowness, the Council of Europe has been and still is a very effective instrument of unity» (Conci 1959B).

<sup>42</sup> «Many readers have expressed their strong need for an educational magazine to analyse deeply – as I wrote in

The magazine – as stated by Elsa Conci – was intended to be firmly grounded in the democratic and christian principles, by helping female readers understand historical reality and come to an informed judgment. Conci used the press to support women’s education, training, and empowerment.

La nostra rivista vuol essere obiettiva e serena. Rimanendo ancorata ai principi che si incardinano sul valore della persona umana e si realizzano nell’umana solidarietà considererò [...] fatti di cronaca, [...] avvenimenti politici nazionali e internazionali [...], il funzionamento di enti e amministrazioni [...], problemi del mondo femminile [...]. Così, care lettrici, noi crediamo dare un contributo alla formazione di una coscienza civica, sociale, politica del mondo femminile indispensabile perché le donne possano collaborare efficacemente allo sviluppo della società umana e al consolidamento dello Stato democratico (Conci, 1959C)<sup>43</sup>.

The magazine was aimed at women from all walks of life, without considering them as a separate “group of society”. Elsa Conci also mentioned that she did not want to form a united front with the women of UDI – Unione Donne Italiane (Italian Women’s Union) – because Christian Democratic women and Communist women were inspired by different principles: in her opinion, «non è possibile intendersi quando i principi che ispirano sono antitetici»<sup>44</sup>. The main point of divergence from Communists relates to the concept of democracy:

Se per altri la democrazia [...] raggiunge la sua perfetta realizzazione con le votazioni a scheda aperta, rinunciando “volontariamente” alla cabina e al voto segreto, “metodi borghesi”, facendo ottenere alla lista unica dell’unico partito il 99,99 per cento, per noi democrazia è il metodo che assicura a ogni cittadino la libera scelta, secondo coscienza e convinzione, il rispetto dell’opinione dell’individuo e della dignità del singolo (Conci 1959C)<sup>45</sup>.

This article is relevant and conclusive for the scope of this paper, because it clearly explains the “comparative method” developed by Elsa Conci in her domestic and international activities, which consists of three steps: investigating historical reality through knowledge and experience, shaping one’s own opinion, providing effective inputs for the solution of problems. This procedure – which responds to purely po-

my letter in January – “the reasons for women’s living presence in our Italian society, in order to single out any related aspects and problems, and try to find out means and methods for solving those issues”. In response to this need, it seems appropriate to deal with topical subjects, facts and events that are of interest to us, in order to shape our opinion in a way that is consistent with the historical reality we live in, and to prepare ourselves to co-operate effectively in solving the problems that afflict human society» (Conci 1959C).

<sup>43</sup> «Our magazine is meant to be objective and peaceful. By being firmly grounded in principles that are deeply rooted in the value of the person and are implemented through human solidarity, our magazine will cover [...] current facts, [...] national and international political events [...], the operation of public bodies and authorities [...], problems specific to women [...]. By doing so, dear readers, we believe we can help shape the civic, social, and political awareness of women, which is crucial for them to be able to effectively participate in the development of human society and the consolidation of the democratic State» (Conci 1959C).

<sup>44</sup> «it is impossible to come to an agreement when you are inspired by opposite principles».

<sup>45</sup> «To others, democracy [...] is fully accomplished when voting takes place by open ballot and voters “voluntarily” waive their right to the secret ballot in a voting booth – a “middle-class method” – thus enabling the single list of the only candidate party to obtain 99.99% of votes. To us, instead, democracy should use methods that leave each citizen free to choose in accordance with his/her own conscience and beliefs, respecting individuals’ opinions and their dignity» (Conci 1959C).

litical purposes – is intended for women to achieve empowerment and can only take place in a democratic context. The press was the “education and training” tool used by Elsa Conci to reach this end.

### *Conclusions*

In summarising the way in which Elsa Conci meant and used comparison to promote women’s political education and training, one may state that in 1956, she began from the initial idea that comparison is useful to solve common problems and understand each other. As a matter of fact, comparison – which originates from dialogue and exchange – highlights similarities and enables greater and deeper knowledge and mutual understanding, thus helping to avoid misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Therefore, in her early writings, Conci emphasised the improvement benefits of comparison and thought that its use for political and social purposes might improve the situation in each and every country as well as the conditions of women.

Later on, from 1961 onward, her writings suggested an additional effect of comparison: mutual understanding on the international scene and the promotion of human solidarity. The kind of comparison that results from the meeting of and exchange between women of the European Women’s Union transcends merely political ends to also serve interpretation and human purposes.

In 1964, after ten years of experience in the European Women’s Union, Elsa Conci eventually appreciated the possibility offered by comparison to interpret reality in a deeper and more sophisticated way, thus emphasising its interpretation scope.

Although Conci as a woman politician mainly focused on the practical benefits of comparison, she then learned to also appreciate its hermeneutical effects. In her thinking, she retained the usefulness of comparison as a source of ideas to develop strategies aimed at achieving social and political goals, or to implement a particular form of solidarity that lays at the foundation of the European Union.

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