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**Antimetaphysics as analytical method in  
Croce's conception of history**

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University of Wales Swansea

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

September 2004

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## Summary

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first full-length study to consider how Croce's antimetaphysical method shaped his approach to history. Crocean criticism has traditionally tended to focus on the *Filosofia dello Spirito* as the main source of Croce's ideas. In reality, Croce's thought is dispersed in a myriad of articles and marginalia. Without neglecting Croce's major works on historiography, I have made use of rarely used material: his *Epistolario* and his *Taccuini di lavoro*, both published in a limited edition by the Istituto italiano per gli studi storici in Naples. Moreover, I have used *La Critica*, Croce's bimonthly journal which ran for some forty years. All this material helped me to reinforce the idea that Croce's philosophy should be read as a series of reflections on historical narrative and literary criticism instead of as an all-encompassing idealistic system. Narrative, objectivity and method are the main issues discussed by the Italian philosopher.

Each chapter opens with a brief historical account of the context within which Croce's ideas were developed. The introductory chapter provides an overview of the reasons for Croce's demise in the aftermath of World War Two. Chapter two explores the origins of Croce's antimetaphysical method from the outset of his long intellectual career. Chapter three analyzes the philosopher's epistemology of history and its non-reductionist purpose. The consequences of Croce's method and its further developments in history and historiography are explored in chapter four, whereas chapter five analyzes the links between history and action and the concept of the contemporaneity of all historiographical explorations. The last section of the chapter is devoted to the potential impact of Croce today within a postmodern climate. After highlighting similarities between some contemporary thinkers (Gadamer in particular) and Croce, I argue that the Italian philosopher still represents a very useful interlocutor for those engaged in the discussion of the nature of history and its present status in the contemporary debate.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Un autore rinasce solamente quando viene inteso nel proprio suo pensiero e con ciò collocato nel posto che gli spetta nella storia della filosofia, dal quale prende, o riprende a esercitare efficacia nel nuovo pensiero come suo vivo elemento e componente.*<sup>1</sup>

### Origins of the research

When I started my research on Benedetto Croce I had a number of preconceptions concerning his thought. My idea of the Neapolitan philosopher was very much influenced by my philosophical studies in Pavia where he was generally considered a sort of appendix to Hegelianism with very little to do with contemporary thought. Even Croce's anti-Fascism and his key role in the promotion of a free culture during one of the country's most critical periods were hardly mentioned. However, as soon as I began reading Croce's prose I was surprised by its simplicity and clarity. His prose and its continuous appeal, through examples and images, to everyday life did not match the convoluted style of the abstract idealist thinker he was supposed to be. Moreover, Croce's long life, far from being dull and cocooned, confined in a golden prison in Naples, was full of dramatic events and displayed a high level of civic engagement in the fate of his country. Theory and practice, thought and action, were inextricably intertwined in Croce.

The turning point of my study was the reading of Gianfranco Contini's *La parte di Benedetto Croce nella cultura italiana*. Here the celebrated literary critic described Croce as the 'sommo atleta della cultura'<sup>2</sup> and complained that in the postwar period 'il pensiero di Croce si trovava in tutti i sensi ad essere volgarizzato.'<sup>3</sup> Contini maintained that 'il crocianesimo corrente ... era asserzione e applicazione di tesi, quasi verità piovute dal cielo ... affermate fuori e sopra la storia.'<sup>4</sup> whereas in reality Croce's teaching was firmly rooted in history and 'essenzialmente metodologico e antimetafisico.'<sup>5</sup> Contini blamed the 'crociani' for this gross misrepresentation of Croce's thought, maintaining that 'il crocianesimo in senso

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<sup>1</sup> B. Croce, *Il carattere della filosofia moderna*, (Bari: Laterza, 1963), p.59.

<sup>2</sup> G. Contini, *La parte di Benedetto Croce nella cultura italiana*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), pp. viii-ix.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



proprio è quello di chi, spesso con dialettica speciosa o con prematura senilità, appende i suoi nidi e le sue ragnatele al tronco crociano'.<sup>6</sup>

Contini's reading of Croce insisted on the fact that the Italian philosopher promoted 'il valore liberatorio del pensiero, della scienza, del metodo' in order to overcome 'un'insopportabile angoscia.'<sup>7</sup> To my amazement Contini argued that Croce's aim was a 'riforma del metodo positivo, instaurazione di un nuovo positivismo.'<sup>8</sup> This was in conflict with the received reading of Croce which saw the philosopher as a fierce anti-positivist with an anti-scientific mindset dictated by his hardcore idealism. Contini argued that Croce on the contrary, was 'un positivista "nuovo" nella radicale distruzione delle metafisiche e dei miti, e nel desiderio ... di essere funzionale, nel sogno di una filosofia solo speciale e in atto, "filosofia dei fatti particolari"'.<sup>9</sup> Contini concluded his brief pamphlet advocating a study which would focus on

due elementi della fortuna crociana, oggi ancora minori, non abbastanza visibili, ma soli atti a garantire la continuità d'efficacia, sono da un lato la premessa dell' "angoscia" come impulso alla tacitazione razionale ... dall'altro la *funzionalità* e il *carattere metodologico della filosofia*, cioè il germe di un nuovo positivismo del quale non si può dire che Croce abbia promosso l'instaurazione.<sup>10</sup>

There have been numerous publications on the much debated 'ritorno di Croce' in the past few years, and many celebrations and commemorative events, but little progress has been made in the destruction of the stereotyped image of a conservative and idealist Croce.<sup>11</sup> There have been few books which go against the current, and it is no coincidence that they are all from outside Italy where the image of a conservative Croce is still widely accepted. A good example of an original reading of Croce's thought is given by Roberts' *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism*, whose main merit lies in detaching the Italian philosopher from Hegelianism.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.53.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.52. Italics mine

<sup>11</sup> *Il ritorno di Croce nella cultura italiana* is a book of collected essays by the Croceans R. Franchini, G.Lunati and F.Tessitore (Milan: Rusconi, 1990). See also P. D'Angelo 'Il ritorno dell'interesse per Croce (1980-1990)', *Cultura e scuola*, 117 (1991), pp. 141-46 and E. Giammattei, 'Il ritorno di Croce', *La città Nuova*, 5 (1990), pp. 72-75.

However, Roberts' important work does not dispel the charge of conservatism.<sup>12</sup>

According to the American scholar,

Croce remained preoccupied with 'history' - an incredibly overloaded category - throughout his career, but he was less interested in the questions about method and objectivity that have dominated the philosophy of history over the past century.<sup>13</sup>

Despite Contini's provocative suggestion, a fresh analysis of Croce's method has not yet been undertaken. Croce's thought is still widely perceived as provincial, detached from reality and conservative. This thesis is in many ways a response to Contini's invitation to rethink Croce's method of analysis, particularly in the light of his numerous, but repeatedly ignored, statements about his own antimetaphysical orientation. It is a supreme irony of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian intellectual history that the country's major figure should be so traduced in his own motherland.

The image of Croce as an 'Olympian' philosopher detached from events was given widespread currency in the aftermath of the Second World War. Here Croce was considered essentially a nineteenth century idealist thinker. This perception originated the received reading of Croce as an idealist system builder. In reality, Croce was not a systematic thinker; he did not want to construct a new philosophical view of the world or a definitive scheme. As a matter of fact, Croce was part of the group of intellectuals, mathematicians and physicists of the twentieth century who had come to realize that many absolute truths in which previous generations had an unwavering faith were nothing but convenient caricatures of the complexity of the world.

Thus this thesis, taking up Contini's stimulus to explore the 'functionality' and the 'methodological character' of Croce's thought, seeks to show that the picture of a Croce concerned with reformulating a restructured idealist philosophy is mistaken and has its origin in the politically charged atmosphere of post World War Two and, apart from the odd exception, is part of the mainstream reading. In reality, Croce's philosophy is much more challenging, dynamic and open-ended than usually thought.

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<sup>12</sup> 'Croce was, at bottom, conservative and cautious, and sought to reassemble the cultural pieces in a new way as quickly and as safely as possible.' D. D. Roberts, *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism*, (London: University of California Press, 1987), p.5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

Since Croce's output was colossal (he wrote some seventy books in sixty years) I have confined my research to a specific topic. I have chosen what I think is the least explored part of Croce's thought, namely his search for a more open method for understanding history. I defined this method 'antimetaphysical' since, as I will explain later in this introduction, it represented a critical response to a 'metaphysical' view which, according to Croce, was characterized by transcendence and a strong reductionism.

This work analyzes Croce's method in its relation to the construction of a new approach to history.<sup>14</sup> Croce's interest in philosophy was inspired by a practical need: to find a suitable method of analysis for history and literary criticism. He realized early in his intellectual itinerary that the schematic procedures of the positive sciences do not grasp the peculiarity of art and history which require a different and less schematic approach.

### **Meaning of metaphysics in Croce**

Croce was against the mentality which he defined as 'metaphysical'. By metaphysics he meant those theoretical constructions which aimed to encapsulate the whole of reality, the whole world, within a single theoretical system; in other words the tendency to reduce the complexity of reality to one main problem. According to the Italian philosopher,

la metafisica disconosce l'ufficio della genuina filosofia, ergendosi sopra di lei come 'filosofia prima' o 'filosofia generale' trattando ... le indagini ... logiche, etiche e le altre tutte ... come 'filosofie particolari' e 'secondarie'.<sup>15</sup>

From the very outset Croce was extremely hostile to all reductionist narratives. In Croce's eyes metaphysics promoted a transcendental view of reality, namely a world which depends on an external cause such as God, the Spirit, Nature, or the Idea. Metaphysics was obsessed with the 'One Cause' or the 'fundamental problem', as Croce put it. Indeed, its very name

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<sup>14</sup> At this stage, at least, I deliberately avoid claiming that it was an attempt to construct a new 'theory' of history, given the almost automatic association of such a claim, in our present cultural climate, with the idea of a new 'grand narrative'. There is a sense, however, in which Croce is indeed theorizing a new approach, precisely in opposition to such a closed system.

<sup>15</sup> Croce, *Il carattere*, p.3.

esprime, nel suo trapasso dall'uno all'altro suo significato, dal *post* al *trans*, il vano conato di innalzamento da un mondo di oggetti a un mondo di entità ... e l'invito e la spinta al passo della trascendenza, dal quale ogni spirito critico sempre rifugge.<sup>16</sup>

Croce was thus rejecting the traditional ontologies of the Catholic philosophy of his time, which analyzed reality in terms of static, universal 'essences' transcending historical change. But this was not the only target of his attack, because there were also more generalized views about the role of philosophy which he sought to discredit.

Croce argued that the metaphysical attitude was connected to a very conservative view of philosophy as the science *par excellence*. The traditional problems inherited from Scholastic thought (matter and mind, God and the world, the essence of reality) had to be replaced by a critical posture which questioned the position of philosophy as the formulation, or worse, the regurgitation of received systems. Croce rejected the idea of philosophy as a contemplative discipline, and saw it instead as a critical tool which had to be applied to specific problems which emerged from specific historical conditions. He claimed that the real achievement of modern philosophy was its 'immanence', its independence from a transcendental world view and its focus on an immanent conception of reality. The 'death of God', to use one of the most famous of Nietzsche's expressions, had destroyed the possibility of a metaphysics, namely the idea of philosophy as a *scientia prima*, replacing it with an immanent view of reality. Indeed Croce argued that

chi continua a considerare la figura del filosofo professionale come il più alto simbolo del pensiero, soggiace a vecchie e oltrepassate concezioni, e non potrebbe giustificarle se non attribuendo al filosofo la speculazione di ciò che è di là o di sopra del mondo o (che è lo stesso) di ripensare il mondo con un pensiero diverso da quello comune.<sup>17</sup>

For Croce the identification of philosophy with the notion of a superior realm of thought was the cause of its increasing isolation from cultural, political and social life. The pervasiveness of the metaphysical attitude was evident in many contemporary thinkers, among whom was to be found his friend Giovanni Gentile, preoccupied with

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>17</sup> B. Croce, 'Troppa filosofia', *La Critica*, i (1923), pp.61-64 (p.62).

penetrating 'absolute reality'. It was this attitude which, according to Croce, created a gap between philosophy, common sense and practical life. Croce was not concerned with the immutable nature of reality. To him, reality was the outcome of a complex cultural development rather than a datum, as in empiricism or naïve realism. It is through analyzing the historical framework in which ideas and events occurred that we can retrieve the elements which make our present situation intelligible.

Philosophy had to surrender its idle and purely speculative remoteness. In an immanent perspective there is no fundamental problem to be solved, but only specific problems which arise in given historical times and societies. Croce maintained that the only viable way of philosophizing was the 'filosofia particolare' which focuses on specific issues without the pretence of explaining what he called 'l'alone di mistero' of reality.<sup>18</sup> The polemical target was the tendency to reduce the complexity of reality to a series of formulas. Intellectuals need to understand that their own positions are conditioned by the time and the society in which they live, and that there are no eternal truths.

Another form of 'metaphysical' thought in disguise was, for Croce, represented by the reductionism present in the natural sciences which philosophers, historians, and the practitioners of other humanistic disciplines were frequently tempted to import into their own procedures and methods of analysis. The methodologies of the natural sciences seek to abstract phenomena from those a-casual and indeterminate features which in many ways constitute the essence of humanistic pursuits. What can be tested and validated in the laboratory is indeed a part of human knowledge. It can give us 'laws' about what will happen under prescribed conditions and in controlled circumstances. But to seek to encapsulate the whole of human understanding and forms of cognition within these boundaries was to Croce grotesque. In this sense one could say that Croce was against those over-zealous late 19<sup>th</sup> century positivists who could not see beyond a crude empiricism. From the very start of his career Croce had an aversion against all-encompassing systems. The illusory allure of such systems in critical periods of history which seemed to be crying out for the solutions they offered was not easy to resist. Hayden White has rightly observed that,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

during the years between the two wars, when most of Europe was yielding to the fascination of a simple solution for all its complex social problems, Croce, virtually alone in the continent, continued to launch his work as social critic.<sup>19</sup>

It took great courage to persist in a position which was easily targeted as lacking in commitment and obfuscatory. Yet White has seen that it was precisely in his uncompromising critiques of easy solutions that the value of his criticism lay.

### **Antimetaphysical method**

This thesis analyzes Croce's antimetaphysical method in relation to history during the whole span of his intellectual career. I have identified the hallmark of Croce's thought in his antimetaphysical attitude. This focus on antimetaphysical method reveals a Croce who was deeply concerned with human freedom and the need to practice what he called an 'immanent' style of thinking in order to grasp its complexity. The monumental idealist philosophy with which he has been so widely associated was in reality the antithesis of his project. Rarely, in the history of ideas, has there been a figure more profoundly, and consistently, misrepresented than Croce. This change of perspective in assessing his thought carries a numbers of important implications. Croce did not believe that philosophy was essentially different from common sense. Furthermore, the anti-metaphysical method entails the rejection of 'total history'.

If one looks at Croce's research as a reaction to an all-encompassing thought one can understand his insistence on subjectivity and narration. Croce devised an epistemology in which history was related to rhetoric, ideology, ethics, and politics, although it could not be reduced to any of these components. According to the Italian philosopher, one needs to take into account the different discourses which constitute the historical narrative. Equally important, history is an open process in which our views are continuously reassessed according to the needs of the present. This 'epistemic relativism', far from opening the doors to skepticism, is the very condition for genuine research. Skepticism in its pure form attacks at root our common experience of knowing, considering any scientific advance irrelevant, whereas a sound epistemic relativism states the provisional achievements of our understanding and does not yield to dogmatic conceptions. Croce's 'historicism', if understood

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<sup>19</sup> H. White, 'The abiding influence of Croce's idea of history', *Journal of Modern History*, 35 (1963), pp. 109-24 (p.110).

correctly, aims at an open conception of history which permits an 'organic' vision of society and culture, and which is opposed to a mechanistic one. Historical narrative is the terrain on which our concepts and ideas are created and tested.

Croce was among the first intellectuals who suggested that philosophers had to intervene in cultural and political battles with intellectual integrity and ideological honesty. For him the aim of philosophy was not to impose the views of an intellectual elite, but rather to become an integral part of the social fabric through its interaction with it. This cultural battle was seen as a critical process in historical terms. Here the pressing question was what human need should history serve; for example, the yearning for a glorious self-affirming past, as in the case of Fascist propaganda, or the liberation, however painful, that comes from facing the past through a more complex and authentic interrogation? Croce chose the latter, defining history as a process of liberation. History enables groups to obtain and maintain power. Historical narrative does not reflect an objective past, but provides space for reassessing the use, misuse and various forms of exploitation of power and interests. Moreover, for Croce historical knowledge was crucial for 'lightening the burden of the present' through an awareness of the past, and this didactic function of historical narrative was, for the philosopher, self-evident and the very reason for its existence. In this sense, and in this sense only, history for Croce was the 'history of liberty'; not in a Hegelian sense but in a very worldly, practical one.

### **The roots of Croce's demise**

Before analyzing Croce's antimetaphysical method it is important to examine the reasons for Croce's neglect particularly in Italy. The first chapter provides the genesis of Croce's demise following the end of the Second World War, showing that Croce's marginalization was based on a political agenda rather than a dispassionate analysis of its theoretical foundations. Progressive circles, using Gramsci as their theoretical champion, targeted Croce as the major exponent of Italian conservatism. The interpretation of Gramsci promoted by intellectuals of the calibre of Bobbio, Garin and Abbate set the tone of the criticism on Croce. Moreover, the need for a renewal of the Italian cultural and philosophical tradition induced intellectuals like Geymonat and Abbagnano to unleash a fierce attack on Croce, now seen as the exponent of an old-fashioned style of philosophizing. From this point, Croce's thought on the Italian

peninsula was mostly confined to Naples, acquiring that veneer of provincialism with which it is still associated.

### **Core of the thesis**

Chapter two analyzes Croce's intellectual apprenticeship outlining the development of Croce's antimetaphysical terrain in the field of history. It rejects the myth of an 'Olympian' and elitist thinker detached from the rest of the world and shows how Croce was deeply involved in the issues of his time. Some space has been given to recounting details of Croce's life, mainly in order to dispel some commonplaces of Croce mythology: for example, that the Italian philosopher harboured a deep-seated contempt for the masses; that he had a lifelong hostility to the methods of the natural sciences, and was responsible for Italy's alleged backwardness in fields such as linguistics, psychology and sociology; that after an initial flirtation with Marxism, he became an implacable opponent of Socialism and Communism.

In order to provide a setting for my thesis, I have explored the importance of Croce's first intellectual excursus in the light of his antimetaphysical posture. Here, Croce's main concern was to find a suitable epistemological foundation for history and literature. He did not have the much-vaunted prejudicial attitude towards positivism which has been widely attributed to him, although he could clearly see its limitations when applied to the humanities. Moreover, far from finding a solution to the attack from positivism in a revamped Hegelianism, he rejected the latter as an implausible 'philosophy of history'. Most importantly for my research, Croce began to examine the subjective component of historical narrative and posed some crucial questions which took forward the debate about the status of history started in Germany a decade or so before. Objectivity, narration, the openness of the historical process, were the themes around which Croce's investigation was orbiting. He made clear that strictly speaking

la storia è il processo storico e questo varia da individuo a individuo ... non c'è un problema pratico che sia il medesimo per tutti, così come non c'è un conoscere storico comune a tutti, ma ... ciascuno ricerca di volta in volta la verità storica che a lui urge per i suoi fini riportare alla coscienza.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Croce, *Il carattere*, p.205.



The encounter with Marxism reinforced Croce's early skepticism towards definitive historical accounts, and made him aware of some important factors in history. Indeed, Croce considered Marxism a useful tool to be used in historiography, for the analysis of 'forces' such as ideology and the economy, rather than a *Weltanschauung* to be followed blindly. This view was directly opposite that of Gentile who considered Marxism as a 'vision of the world'.

I have used the correspondence between Croce and Gentile to show that the celebrated collaboration, and the subsequent traumatic break between the two philosophers, is the result of a superficial reading. In reality, Croce and Gentile had very different points of view from the very start of their collaboration. Gentile was sympathetic to a systematic, all-inclusive philosophy, which is the ultimate purpose of idealism, whereas Croce used philosophy to investigate the theoretical foundations of history and literature.

The programme of the bimonthly *La Critica* has also helped me to show Croce's antimetaphysical intentions. Croce's aim was to produce a more thorough understanding of specific disciplines, and not to enclose the whole knowledge within an idealistic system.

The structure of Croce's epistemology of history has been investigated in detail in chapter three. Here, after a brief sketch of the period during which Croce's ideas were formed, I have analyzed what I have called Croce's 'modes of critique' giving a different interpretation of the purpose behind the 'Philosophy of the Spirit'. Indeed, whereas this work has previously been interpreted as the monumental systematic basis of a neo-idealistic system, I have read it as the attempt to build an open and non-reductionist narrative to be applied to historical research. This interpretation privileges the normative rather than the ontological value of the *Filosofia dello Spirito* and follows Croce's suggestion that any ontological attempt to explain reality should be abandoned. Thus, Croce's method becomes a tool for critical judgements on history with the help of the aesthetic, logical, economic and ethical 'modes'.

Croce's antimetaphysical method was also the main foundation for his critique of the exact sciences and the role they might play in the historical narrative. Croce rejected the reductionism of a conception of history based on 'scientific laws', emphasizing instead the components of subjectivity in the historical discourse. He

insisted that history had to find its own methodology embracing, instead of eschewing, issues associated with subjectivity.

In chapter four I have underlined the importance of *Teoria e storia della storia storiografia* which, in my opinion, represents the most important point of development of Croce's antimetaphysical method. The Italian philosopher abandoned even the external form of philosophical treatises in order to embrace an open theory of historiography exploring a number of different issues among which the concepts of prejudice, tradition and validity of the historical interpretation. He also explored the ethico-political component of historical narrative providing a powerful tool for analyzing the dynamics of politics and power as well as the ethical component of all historiographies.

The notion of history as a contemporary issue is the main theme which runs through chapter five. Here I pointed out how Croce, during a critical phase for the Italian state, related history to the needs and interests of the present in order to shape a meaningful historical account. In doing so Croce remained faithful to his antimetaphysical epistemology. He gave history a purposive dimension, relating it to praxis and 'freedom.' History addresses the problems we are facing and provides crucial suggestions for our activities. Historical discourse in Croce became critical for overcoming the past, creating the conditions for understanding the present, and in preparing for the future. I also emphasized the differences between Croce's open historical discourse, and Marxism and Hegelianism with their strong elements of determinism.

The last section of chapter five has been devoted to the potential impact of Croce's ideas today. I found many similarities with some aspects of postmodernism and its suspicion of 'grand narratives' and explored the affinity of themes between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Croce's idea of history. I have concluded my thesis maintaining that Croce can be used as a valuable interlocutor for those engaged in discussing contemporary historiographical issues.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ORIGINS OF CROCE'S DEMISE IN ITALIAN POST-WAR CULTURE

#### 1.1 PROPONENTS OF A 'PROGRESSIVE' CULTURE

This section of the chapter will be primarily concerned with the interpretation of Croce's philosophy as expounded by some important leaders of what we can call Italian progressive culture. I include in the definition of 'progressive culture' that group of post-war intellectuals – from Marxists to Social Democrats – who were strongly in favour of social and political reforms.

The main aim of post-war progressive intellectuals was to build a radical alternative to Fascism, and to 19th century Liberalism which was considered a sort of precursor of it. Croce was undoubtedly seen as a great protagonist of an earlier renewal of Italian culture (Gramsci) and the 'moral conscience of Italian anti-Fascism'.<sup>21</sup> However, his thought was also seen as permeated by a 19th century idealist perspective. Moreover, in the eyes of this new generation of intellectuals, Croce promoted a politically conservative view which had itself to be overcome in the interests of reform.

I believe that the reading of Croce, initiated by Gramsci and carried on by prominent intellectuals such as Bobbio, Garin and Abbate during the first half of the 20th century, is crucial for an understanding of the Neapolitan philosopher's subsequent reception in Italy.

Broadly speaking, their strategy was to 'reduce' the thinker's philosophy to a form of idealism embodying a sharp conceptual distinction between theory and practice, and so concerned with the theoretical as to deserve the description 'speculative philosophy'. Furthermore, the methodological principles underlying Croce's idealism were themselves seen as reflecting his political conservatism. Analysing the strategy used by these theorists will take us to the very root of one of the most widespread interpretations of Croce's work.

After Croce's death in 1952, post-war Italian culture began to settle its account with him. This had earlier been set in motion on the left by the communist leader Palmiro Togliatti, one of whose first initiatives on his return to Italy in 1944 was to establish a theoretical monthly, *La Rinascita*. In 1944 he penned an article on Croce's

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<sup>21</sup> N. Bobbio, *Profilo ideologico del novecento italiano* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), p.141.

cultural and political role in Italy during the Fascist era, accusing him of ‘an open collaboration’ with the regime:

Benedetto Croce, ha avuto, come campione della lotta contro il marxismo, una curiosa situazione di privilegio, nel corso degli ultimi venti anni. Egli ha tenuto cattedra in questa materia, istituendosi così tra lui e il fascismo un’ aperta collaborazione, prezzo della facoltà che gli fu concessa di arrischiare ogni tanto una timida frecciolina contro il regime.<sup>22</sup>

As editor of Gramsci’s *Quaderni*, Togliatti was fully aware of the potential on the left for utilizing the Sardinian’s powerful critique of Croce. Togliatti’s advocacy of the Gramscian critique was to have a profound effect on future readings of Croce. Gramsci, although he did not live long enough to witness Croce’s developments of his own thought from the late 1930’s, nevertheless laid the foundations for an important critical account of the Neapolitan thinker. The terrain was so established that at issue was the battle between two different conceptions of the world, one being conservative and endemically anti-democratic and the other progressive, in favour of radical change, and unafraid of the traumatic breaks with tradition that ‘progress’ demands.

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<sup>22</sup> P. Togliatti ‘Che cosa deve essere il partito comunista’, *La Rinascita*, 1, June 1944, p.30.

## 1.2 GRAMSCI'S ATTACK

After the fall of the fascist regime, the intellectual and politician Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) became one of the most widely read thinkers in the new post-war culture. The posthumous publication of both the *Lettere* in 1947 and the *Quaderni* between 1948 and 1951 were undoubtedly major cultural events for the newborn Italian republic.

Although fragmented because of the nature of his confinement as a political prisoner, Gramsci's *Quaderni* represent an exceptional attempt to rethink orthodox Marxism and specifically the condition of socialism in Italy after its defeat by Fascism. Gramsci devoted a considerable part of his work to the critique of Croce's philosophy, which at that time represented a powerful critique of Marxism as well as a challenge to any kind of totalitarian system of thought. Eugenio Garin summarises well the main programme of the *Quaderni*. It was to

mettere a fuoco la funzione degli intellettuali nella storia d'Italia, ossia in una storia singolare d'Europa ... definire una tradizione nazionale *diversa* ricostituita su un passato con canoni storiografici nuovi, in una grande operazione politica quale è sempre la *scelta* di un passato; analizzare criticamente l'opera di Croce indicata come la più rilevante nella cultura italiana prima del fascismo.<sup>23</sup>

In a recent book David Ward points out how 'Gramsci's relationship to Croce was far from simple. Like many young people of his generation he had been drawn to Croce in the early years of the century.'<sup>24</sup> In fact, Croce was regarded by Gramsci as one of the most influential cultural leaders in Italy and Europe. His prestige, he maintained, was comparable to that of the Pope in matters of faith and morals. Indeed, the philosopher could be considered 'una specie di papa laico' of culture.<sup>25</sup> His importance could hardly be underestimated and the influence of the Neapolitan philosopher in Italian intellectual life was pervasive.

Croce represented one of the richest sources of cultural ferment in the period between the turn of the twentieth century and the First World War. Not only did he support a number of reviews and newspapers such as *La Voce*, *L'Unità*, *La*

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<sup>23</sup> E. Garin, *Con Gramsci* (Rome: Riuniti, 1997), p.123.

<sup>24</sup> D. Ward, *Antifascism, Cultural Politics in Italy 1943-1947, Benedetto Croce and the Liberals, Carlo Levi and the "Actionists"* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), p.67.

<sup>25</sup> A. Gramsci, *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce* (Rome: Riuniti, 2000), p. 314.

*rivoluzione liberale*, but he was also the editor of the enormously influential *La Critica*.

Gramsci believed that Croce's work represented a major cultural shift comparable with what had occurred in the Renaissance, and his function was comparable to that of a religious reformer<sup>26</sup> affecting virtually every aspect of both the political and cultural life of Italy and Europe:

l'attività intellettuale e filosofica del Croce si inserisce nella tradizione culturale del nuovo Stato italiano e riporta la cultura nazionale alle origini sprovvincializzandola e depurandola di tutte le scorie magniloquenti e bizzarre del Risorgimento.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed Gramsci maintained that the Neapolitan philosopher's great merit lay in building an alternative cultural perspective, based on 'immanence'<sup>28</sup> rather than 'transcendentalism', exerting a powerful secularising influence in Italy and Europe:

Croce è essenzialmente anticofessionale ... e per un largo gruppo di intellettuali italiani ed europei la sua filosofia ... è stata una vera e propria riforma intellettuale e morale di tipo 'Rinascimento'. 'Vivere senza religione' ... è stato il succo che il Sorel ha tratto dalla lettura del Croce.<sup>29</sup>

A substantial part of Gramsci's appraisal consists of detailed analysis of the reasons for Croce's popularity among European intellectuals. He emphasized the moral dimension of Croce's thought, especially his firm belief in traditional values such as reason, truth and freedom which he held to be immutable in the face of historical and cultural disaster or upheaval. Indeed, according to Gramsci, Croce's attitude during the First World War exhibited faith in a rational plan, which drives history and events, and gives a certain Olympian serenity to his thought even in the most critical times:

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<sup>26</sup> 'Il significato e la funzione intellettuale di Croce ... sono quelli di un riformatore religioso.' *ibid.*, p.234.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>28</sup> This claim about Croce's 'immanence' despite Gramsci's simultaneous claim about his 'idealism' will be discussed later.

<sup>29</sup> Gramsci, *Il materialismo*, p.283.

Il Croce è rimasto imperturbabile nella sua serenità e nell'affermazione nella sua fede che 'metafisicamente il male non può prevalere e che la storia è razionalità'.<sup>30</sup>

For Gramsci this faith was a defining element of Croce's 'ethico-political' conception of history. Moreover, this detachment from the world was perfectly reflected in Croce's limpid prose, which the communist thinker related to the best tradition of 'Italian scientific prose':

mi pare ... esatto collocare gli scritti del Croce nella linea della prosa scientifica italiana che ha avuto scrittori come il Galileo.<sup>31</sup>

This is the reason why, Gramsci acknowledged, the Neapolitan philosopher found a fertile ground in the Anglo-Saxon world:

gli anglosassoni hanno sempre preferito le concezioni del mondo che non si presentavano come grandi e farraginosi sistemi ma come espressione del senso comune, integrato dalla critica e dalla riflessione, come soluzione di problemi morali e pratici.<sup>32</sup>

Gramsci took Croce to be subscribing to a view which was committed to values which endure through historical change framed within an idealistic metaphysics. Moreover, the immanentist character of Croce's metaphysics enabled him to appeal to practice and common sense. And indeed Gramsci considered that the hub of Croce's whole philosophical conception lay in his continuous appeal to life in practice.

This attachment to life made the Neapolitan philosopher a sort of interpreter of a 'common sense view' complemented by a critique on moral and practical issues. Croce's activity was therefore presented as a critical reflection on traditional thought, his aim being the refutation of a number of prejudices typical of philosophy. Unfortunately, however, such positive features of Gramsci's appraisal were swept up into the collective amnesia which seems to have captured, with one or two partial exceptions we shall discuss, Italy's powerfully influential 'progressive' intellectuals in their anxiety to accompany the country's economic and social reconstruction with a

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.231.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.232.

'progressive' intellectual renewal which only too easily regimented their predecessors into favourable and hostile camps.<sup>33</sup>

In effect, it was easier to focus on Gramsci's comments which saw Croce's philosophical enterprise in a more negative light. Crucially, Croce's rejection of materialism was held by the Marxist thinker to lead to an intellectualized and reactionary conception of value (reason, truth, freedom) which *purposefully* excluded the masses from the sphere of political and cultural influence: 'la morale del Croce è troppo da intellettuali ... non può diventare popolare'<sup>34</sup>. Croce's main defect was therefore his conscious refusal to 'go to the people':

Croce non è 'andato al popolo', non è voluto diventare un elemento 'nazionale' ... non ha voluto creare una schiera di discepoli che ... potessero popolarizzare la sua filosofia, tentando di farla diventare un elemento educativo fin dalle scuole elementari.<sup>35</sup>

On Gramsci's reading, Croce's thought, far from being an impartial and Olympian reflection on philosophy, expressed an ideologically driven purpose.

According to the progressive thinker, both the moral tone and the style of Croce's writings are part of an attempt to provide a solid ideological foundation for the Italian bourgeoisie. Croce's thought, despite its claim to be a theoretical philosophy 'super partes' was the ideology of a specific class which found in the Neapolitan thinker a formidable champion for its cause. Indeed, for Gramsci, the whole project of the *Filosofia dello Spirito*, and more specifically Croce's historical account of both Italy and Europe, exhibited an ineradicable reactionary bias.

In particular, Gramsci remarked that Croce's historical perspective marginalized or even ignored revolutionary fractures highlighting only moments of restoration, and asked:

è possibile scrivere (concepire) una storia d'Europa del XIX secolo senza trattare organicamente della rivoluzione francese e delle guerre napoleoniche? E può farsi una storia d'Italia e dell'età moderna senza trattare delle lotte del Risorgimento?<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Croce was not the only Italian thinker to suffer this form of ideological marginalization. One could point to such figures as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century sociological thinkers Pareto and Mosca, easily seen as 'elite' intellectuals feeding Fascist ideas.

<sup>34</sup> Gramsci, *Il materialismo*, p.314.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.283.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.242.



Gramsci saw in Croce a strong exponent of that 19th century European tradition of historiography which was afraid of any violent uprising and tended systematically to minimize the moments of struggle in favour of those of settlement. The result is a historical account which is:

un hegelismo degenerato e mutilato, perche' la sua preoccupazione fondamentale è un timor panico dei movimenti giacobini, di ogni intervento attivo delle grandi masse popolari come fattore di progresso storico.<sup>37</sup>

The philosophical system that Croce created provided a sort of introductory education ready to be used by the ruling elites, an effective tool of restoration for staving off social change and the advent of socialism. In this context, Croce's critique of Marx's philosophy of praxis was at bottom an attempt to stop the rising power of the masses.

But what Gramsci also stressed was the derivation of the best elements of Croce's thought from Marxism. Despite his fierce critique of historical materialism the Neapolitan thinker used it in his analysis of ideologies and in his political theory, transforming it into a renewed version of speculative philosophy:

Il Croce ha ritradotto in linguaggio speculativo le acquisizioni progressive della filosofia della praxis e in questa ritraduzione è il meglio del suo pensiero.<sup>38</sup>

According to Gramsci Croce denied that Marxism had any sort of lasting influence on his thought. He had refused to incorporate historical materialism within his philosophical framework and assigned to it a merely empirical role. Moreover, Gramsci held that the philosopher deliberately made use of historical materialism to set up his philosophical views arguing that

una gran parte della filosofia di Croce rappresenta questo tentativo di riassorbire la filosofia della praxis e incorporarla come ancella della cultura tradizionale.<sup>39</sup>

For Gramsci this use of Marxism provided a framework for a conservative conception of politics, in which historical development remains in the hands of the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.235.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 293.

ruling classes. Indeed, Gramsci thought that Croce's doctrine of political ideologies as instruments for effective political control was derived from Marx's statement of ideologies as tools for obtaining power in the political struggle. More specifically, the whole conception of ethico-political history<sup>40</sup> was inspired by historical materialism. Nevertheless, whereas Marx used these stances to unmask the true nature of ideologies as a means of coercion on the part of the ruling classes, Croce exploited them to find a justification for 'political conservatism' and preservation of the status quo.

Another target of Gramsci's criticism, connected with the notion of ethico-political history, is Croce's separation between 'intellectual' and 'political' roles in society. Gramsci pointed out that intellectuals have an active function in the political struggle, to the extent that they influence cultural trends and the ideologies in which political views develop.<sup>41</sup> The Marxist thinker held that the consequence of Croce's separation leads to the support of the elites in power, and results in a policy of *laissez faire*, or even of support for the established order, on the part of intellectuals.

Here lies one of the major differences between Croce and Gramsci. For the latter, intellectuals - who are 'organic', and thus not restricted to philosophers, historians, artists and alike, but include a broader spectrum of creators of the culture of the social formation - *are* politicians, they play a direct political role, supporting or criticising the form of government in power; for Croce the two roles are detached and must remain differentiated.

Gramsci instead claimed that only the identification between intellectual and politician and hence that of philosophy and politics could lead to a concrete concept of history:

Se il politico è uno storico ... lo storico è un politico e in questo senso ... la storia è sempre storia contemporanea, cioè politica.<sup>42</sup>

For Gramsci, the complexity of historical movements in Croce's thought was reduced to an explanation of ideas without reference to social relations. Moreover, the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.200.

<sup>40</sup> A. Gramsci: 'L'avvicinamento dei due termini *etica* e *politica* ... è l'espressione delle esigenze in cui si muove il pensiero crociano: l'*etica* si riferisce all'attività della società civile, all'egemonia; la *politica* si riferisce alla coercizione statale e governativa.' Ibid., p.240.

<sup>41</sup> See A. Gramsci, *Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura* (Rome: Riuniti, 2000), pp.3-23.

<sup>42</sup> Gramsci, *Il materialismo storico*, ibid., p.274.

Neapolitan philosopher did not take into account the economic sphere in which men live and act.

The consequence of this reading produced an idealistic and strongly conservative vision of the past that was represented by Croce's ethico-political approach to history. Moreover, this theoretical construction could not properly be defined as history, the Sardinian intellectual insisted; it is 'niente altro che una presentazione polemica di filosofemi più o meno interessanti, ma non è storia'.<sup>43</sup> Marxism, according to Gramsci, is not a conciliatory or harmonious conception of history, it is a realistic one which takes into account the tensions and ruptures contained in social and economic changes.

In opposition to Croce's purely speculative philosophy, Gramsci maintained, stands historical materialism which eliminates the duality between theory and practice, or transcendence and immanence. Therefore Marxism is the true philosophy of history since it encapsulates the practical concerns of human beings in given historical conditions and provides concrete answers. Thus theory is absorbed into practice.

A final objection raised by Gramsci to Croce's philosophy of history, concerns the so called 'religione della libertà',

La libertà come identità di storia [e di spirito] e la libertà come religione-superstizione, come ideologia immediatamente circostanziata, come strumento pratico di governo.<sup>44</sup>

The pillar of Croce's conception of history is 'liberty' as the core of any attempt to make sense of our past and ultimately our present.<sup>45</sup> But for the progressive intellectual 'freedom' is a conceptual tool to be applied to a particular social group. Therefore, one cannot talk about liberty in abstract terms or we risk considering all kinds of historical institutions as embodying the development of freedom, even the ancient provinces of the tyrannical Persian state:

Se la storia è storia della libertà ... la formula è valida per la storia di tutto il genere umano di ogni tempo e di ogni luogo, è libertà anche la

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.255.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.245

<sup>45</sup> For example: 'La libertà come l'eterna formatrice della storia, soggetto stesso di ogni storia. Come tale, essa è, per un verso, il principio esplicativo del corso storico e, per l'altro, l'ideale morale dell'umanità.' In B. Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (Bari: Laterza, 1973), p.48.

storia delle satrapie orientali. Libertà allora significa solo ‘movimento’, svolgimento, dialettica.<sup>46</sup>

In reality this notion of liberty, Gramsci argued, masks once again a tendency in Croce towards a conservative view of politics:

Un concetto come quello di libertà che si presta ad essere impiegato dagli stessi gesuiti, contro i liberali (...) non è appunto solo un involucro concettuale che vale solo per il nocciolo reale che ogni gruppo sociale vi pone? E si può quindi parlare di religione della libertà?<sup>47</sup>

What Croce calls ‘the religion of liberty’, for the Marxist thinker is simply a political ideology, namely the ideology which bestows a leading role on the middle class. Gramsci’s point is that Croce’s apparently abstract and trans-historical conception of liberty is in fact a very concrete historical conception which embodies bourgeois class interests. Croce’s tendency to abstraction, and his denial of the Marxist principle that freedom is a concrete conceptual tool, blinded him to his own bias.

To Gramsci, however there was a still deeper flaw in Croce’s notion of liberty. It could not have the characteristics and the popularity of the catholic religion, since it was not based on a ‘faith’ shared by all strata of society. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Gramsci thought that the elitist Croce was not concerned with popularising his views because of his aristocratic conception of culture<sup>48</sup>. For the Marxist thinker Croce’s apparent disengagement with the masses is directly connected with the philosopher’s conception of liberty. In fact Croce’s notion of liberty could be linked with the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of ‘moderatismo’ which harks back to Vincenzo Cuoco and his conception of ‘rivoluzione passiva’ that expresses ‘assenza di un’iniziativa popolare’ in favour of ‘restaurazioni progressive’.<sup>49</sup> Hence, the Marxist intellectual concluded that, in the end, the ‘religione della libertà’ was nothing but a vigorous attempt to conserve both the political and economic institutions of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

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<sup>46</sup> Gramsci, *Il materialismo storico*, p.245.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.p.246.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Per Croce è religione ogni concezione del mondo che si presenti come una morale. Ma è avvenuto questo per libertà? Essa è stata religione per un piccolo numero di intellettuali.’ Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.276.

Related to this conservative vision of history there was what Gramsci called Croce's 'obsession' with historical materialism:

Il Croce combatte con troppo accanimento la filosofia della praxis ... Questo accanimento è sospetto, può rivelarsi un alibi per negare una resa dei conti.<sup>50</sup>

We should not forget that when Gramsci was writing his *Quaderni dal carcere* Croce's fame was at its peak, and his interpretation of Marxism as a pseudo-philosophy was widespread. That was one of the reasons why Gramsci advocated a sort of 'Anti-Croce' to counter the philosopher's views.

The only way to challenge Croce's supremacy, for Gramsci, was to build a strong movement of (Marxist) intellectuals keenly devoted to the critique of Croce's work in order to come to terms with his philosophy. The point worthy of note here is Gramsci's awareness of the great political weight of Croce's views. The Sardinian thinker was conscious of the important cultural operation that Croce was carrying out. In the eyes of Gramsci it was not only a question of theory or mere philosophical speculation: the aim of Croce's work of synthesis was to build a radical cultural restoration. His philosophy was influencing the whole of Italian - and arguably European - society; thus he had to be taken seriously and thoroughly studied in order to be defeated:

Occorre ... venire a questa resa di conti, nel modo più ampio e approfondito possibile. Un lavoro di tal genere, un *Anti-Croce* che nell'atmosfera culturale moderna potesse avere il significato e l'importanza che ha avuto l'*Anti-Düring* per la generazione precedente la Guerra mondiale, varebbe la pena che un intero gruppo di uomini ci dedicasse dieci anni di attività.<sup>51</sup>

If we now move onto the purely theoretical arena, we can see how Gramsci outlined a critique of Croce's use of dialectic, believing that this notion was central to the philosopher's system and had direct repercussions on his conservative political attitude. The Marxist intellectual found that Croce's use of dialectic was quite innovative in so far as it introduced the notion of 'distincts' (*distinti*) which replaced that of 'opposites' (*opposti*) given by Hegel. The four-fold distinction within the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.250.

dialectical movement is an essential element of Croce's method. The four 'distincts' in Croce's system are: art, philosophy, economy and ethics. Such activities for the Neapolitan philosopher are *distinct*; however the distinctions lead not to separation but rather to interrelations. Distinguishing rather than opposing the 'distincts' allowed Croce to connect different spheres of human endeavour without privileging a particular one. Thus there could be space for interdependent disciplines coexisting at the same time.<sup>52</sup> Croce claimed that this division was essential for understanding the real nature of the cognitive act and avoiding reductionism. It is essential to preserve the unique character of these distinct human activities, whether theoretical or practical.

Despite Gramsci's indebtedness to Croce in his own revision of Marxist determinism, he was nevertheless deeply concerned by the Neapolitan's refutation of the classical Marxist structure/superstructure division as a piece of metaphysics. Indeed, according to Gramsci, the critique of Marxism carried out by Croce was mainly based on the argument that historical materialism was an abstract method which tended to embody an oversimplified vision of reality centred around the economy. The economic discipline served as a kind of 'hidden god' (*dio ascoso*) to explain all other aspects of life. But Gramsci argued that the Marxist distinction between structure and superstructure had more validity than that of Croce's 'distincts', and levelled back at the Neapolitan philosopher the charge of transcendentalism. The Marxist distinction was an indispensable tool for understanding the actual mechanisms of society and avoiding an impressionistic conception of its development.

On the other hand, Croce's notion of distincts, for the Sardinian thinker, had the function of weakening the force of the dialectic, rendering it anodyne through transformist subterfuges. The result of this operation was 'speculative philosophy' which had all the characteristics of a theology:

La filosofia del Croce rimane una filosofia 'speculativa' e in ciò non è solo una traccia di trascendenza e di teologia, ma è tutta la trascendenza e la teologia appena liberate dalla più grossolana scorza mitologica.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.250.

<sup>52</sup> This topic will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 3.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

The extent to which this is a justified critique will be dealt with in a subsequent section dealing with Croce's intellectual interaction with Marxism. The point to be made at this stage is that the Gramscian critique was influential on a whole generation of post-war intellectuals and on their reception of Croce.

### 1.3 1955: THE 'PROGRESSIVE' ASSAULT

The powerful critique contained in the Gramscian *Quaderni* began to question the position of Croce in Italian culture, and many other critical studies were published in the wake of this seminal text. Indeed, shortly after the Second World War we find a flood of publications which, in one way or another, tried to come to terms with Croce's philosophy.<sup>54</sup> However, the major attack came from the progressive area a decade later, namely in 1955. This is a crucial date for the history of criticism of Croce's thought since three important books were published that year: *Politica e cultura* by Norberto Bobbio, *Cronache di filosofia italiana* by Eugenio Garin, and *La filosofia di Benedetto Croce e la crisi della società italiana* by Michele Abbate.

The scholar Michele Biscione in an article of 1956 accurately portrayed the cultural climate of those times:

Nel campo del pensiero politico un atteggiamento di netta opposizione a Croce ha caratterizzato già da molto ... l'orientamento del marxismo italiano. Spezzare una lancia contro Croce era un'ottima prassi e perciò una teoria senz'altro raccomandabile, sia per il gregario che per il dirigente con incombenze di carattere culturale. Il che è stato fatto con un'ampiezza che è solo pari alla pesantezza degli interventi, in alto, meno in alto e in basso, nella discussione di teorie storiografiche, come per questioni di carattere politico ed etico.<sup>55</sup>

I have already mentioned the fact that the communist leader Togliatti saw Croce's thought as extremely reactionary, and thought that it could influence the orientation of large strata of the population in post-war Italy. The context within which this conflict took place was mainly a political one since Croce represented, both in the eyes of the Communists and of the Christian-democrats, a political enemy to be defeated<sup>56</sup>. The strategy was fairly simple. One needed to create a line of continuity between 19<sup>th</sup> century Liberalism and Fascism and underline the conservative stances that both the man, and more importantly, his theory, embodied.

Togliatti had in mind Gramsci's suggestion regarding the creation of an 'Anti-Croce', but the Marxist intellectual's critique was tempered by a deep admiration for

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<sup>54</sup> For an excellent bibliography on the most important critical writings on Benedetto Croce from 1955 to 1990 see C. Ocone, *Bibliografia ragionata degli scritti su Benedetto Croce* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1993).

<sup>55</sup> M. Biscione, 'Croce e la politica della cultura', *Rivista di filosofia*, 3 (1956), pp.247-65 (p.247).

<sup>56</sup> We should not forget that the Catholic Church put Croce's works on the Index in 1932. Indeed the philosopher was described as 'un avvelenatore di coscienze'.



Croce, whereas Togliatti's charges were ruthless. Croce's authorship of the intellectual's manifesto against Fascism cut no ice with Togliatti. Indeed Croce was identified as the enemy of Marxism during the Fascist regime and

l'aver accettato questa funzione, mentre noi eravamo forzatamente assenti e muti, o perchè al bando del paese o perchè perseguitati fino alla morte dei nostri migliori, è una macchia di ordine morale che non gli possiamo perdonare e che egli non riuscirà a cancellare.<sup>57</sup>

In the extremely polarised political atmosphere of the immediate post-war period there was no place for what was perceived by some as an ambiguous position towards the Fascist dictatorship. Moreover, even the former followers of Croce were of the opinion that now the time had come for a more active perspective on politics and culture; after all there was an entire nation to be rebuilt on a democratic basis.

In an article on *La nuova Europa* the once Crocean De Ruggiero pointed out how the limit of Croce's thought was

Una visione troppo retrospettiva del reale: esso concludeva una fase del mondo senza aprirne una nuova; e in quella fase esso assorbiva e scioglieva senza residui, col suo realistico immanentismo, quei valori eterni dello spirito, la cui relativa trascendenza di fronte alla realtà empirica avrebbe potuto creare un fecondo squilibrio capace di schiudere le porte del futuro.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, from now on, even to former admirers, the thought of Croce was often associated with a certain kind of conservatism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and his philosophy, once considered to be at the cutting edge of Italian culture, was increasingly perceived as old and out of date.

For many of Croce's critics, to conceive of the future as a simple development from the present was to limit the degree to which this future could be radically different from the past. Indeed, one of the main reasons why many intellectuals jettisoned Croce was that his inherently 'retrospective' vision of reality was not compatible with the radical change they advocated.

*Politica e cultura* by Bobbio is undoubtedly influenced by this cultural climate. One of the main aims of these collected essays was to cast light on the

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<sup>57</sup> P. Togliatti, 'Che cosa deve essere il partito comunista', p.30.

relation between politics and culture, discussing the Gramscian idea of the 'organic intellectual' engaged in the class struggle and responsible for the education of the masses. This implied, of course, a settling of accounts with Croce's philosophical and political views. However, Bobbio rejects the Togliattian interpretation of a proto-fascist Croce, underlining the great importance that the Neapolitan philosopher had during the years of the dictatorship:

Non si può dimenticare che la strada maestra per convertire all'antifascismo gli incerti era di far leggere i libri di Croce, che la maggior parte dei giovani intellettuali arrivarono all'antifascismo attraverso Croce e ... traevano conforto dal sapere che Croce, il rappresentante più alto e più illustre della cultura italiana, non si era piegato alla dittatura. Ogni critica dell'atteggiamento di Croce durante il fascismo è astiosa e malevola polemica. Come tale, non merita discussione.<sup>59</sup>

The position of Bobbio could be considered a moderate one: although in favour of a radical reform of the Italian state, Bobbio refused any ideological label, maintaining that

il compito degli uomini di cultura è più che mai oggi quello di seminare dei dubbi, non già di raccogliere certezze.<sup>60</sup>

The intellectual has to keep an independent position so that he or she can exercise a fundamental critique on state and society. Thus, for Bobbio, who was in direct polemic with Togliatti, the idea of intellectuals subservient to a political agenda is unacceptable, since the critical function of free thinkers cannot accommodate the imposition of any sort of intellectual strait-jacket.

On the other hand, Bobbio criticises the opposite conception of an apolitical culture, believing that no intellectual production can be detached from the society in which it flourishes or from the questions that this society poses. Bobbio proposed the idea of a 'politica della cultura' instead of that of a 'cultura politicizzata' promoted by most politicians of the left. Intellectuals had to share a common ground and adopt a

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<sup>58</sup> G. De Ruggiero, 'Lo storicismo. La fase crociana' now in *Il ritorno alla ragione* (Bari: Laterza, 1946), p.14.

<sup>59</sup> N. Bobbio, *Politica e cultura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1955), p.239.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

‘posizione di massima apertura verso le posizioni filosofiche, ideologiche, mentali differenti’, insisting on ‘ciò che è comune a tutti gli uomini di cultura’.<sup>61</sup>

According to Bobbio, Croce is one of the finest examples of the man of culture, grounded in the political terrain, yet without ‘politicising’ culture:

Vi fu nel pensiero e nelle preoccupazioni di Croce un’idea costante: gli uomini di cultura ... hanno una responsabilità ed una funzione politica *in quanto uomini di cultura*.<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, Bobbio maintained that for Croce cultural activity has a political influence, since culture serves to expand human knowledge, but this influence is tempered by the division between theory and practice. To Croce culture should not be mixed with politics; it has its own dignity and purpose which is the enhancement of the life of the spirit.

Bobbio has a great deal of sympathy for Croce’s view that the promotion of human creativity through art, science, history and philosophy is ultimately the meaning of our existence. The major concern for intellectuals like Bobbio was to create a new democratic system in which culture would be widely available to the people. On the other hand, Croce did not seem interested in what he saw as a merely practical issue. Yet, from a liberal democratic point of view to deal with culture was also to analyze the institutional framework of society.

In the essay entitled *Benedetto Croce e il liberalismo* Bobbio argues that the Neapolitan philosopher does not take into account the historical institutions in which cultural activities are created, and launches a fierce attack on Croce’s conception of Liberalism. To talk about the promotion of culture and human creativity without considering the actual historical institutions which embody these activities was for Bobbio unacceptable. The aim of the essay is very clear:

ritengo sia importante sapere se ed entro quali limiti il pensiero di Croce possa dirsi liberale.<sup>63</sup>

The main argument of the essay is that Croce’s vision of culture and society is a conservative one, and that his Liberalism is not based on a strong theoretical

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p.238.

premise but rather on 'passion'. For Bobbio, Croce remains essentially linked to this conservative vision even when he openly rejected Fascism. This was because Croce was liberal 'per temperamento e per sentimento', but 'nessuno aveva potuto conoscere in lui un liberale per dottrina.'<sup>64</sup> In other words according to Bobbio, Croce's political stance was not to be considered part of the liberal-democratic tradition but rather of the conservative one. In order to support this position Bobbio points at Croce's political background:

E' un fatto piuttosto sconcertante ... che colui che sarebbe diventato un coraggioso paladino della libertà e secondo alcuni un insuperato teorico del liberalismo, non abbia mai dimostrato nel periodo della sua formazione interesse per la storia del liberalismo, anzi abbia mostrato forte attrazione per gli scrittori estranei a quella storia o addirittura illiberali.<sup>65</sup>

Bobbio stresses the fact that the first political 'master' of Croce was Karl Marx, who left a 'profonda traccia nei suoi orientamenti politici'<sup>66</sup>. From Marx the Neapolitan philosopher inherited a 'realistic' vision of history, in which economic forces were at work. This realistic concept of 'force' was introduced into Croce's thinking, in place of an intellectual tradition utilizing abstract, ideological or 'moralistic' conceptions of justice and humanity.

The other thinkers who attracted the young Croce were George Sorel, well known for his theory of violence, and the reactionary German philosopher Treitschke. Furthermore, the core of Croce's political views drew on Machiavelli, another political thinker difficult to reconcile with the liberal tradition, with its distaste for the ruthless pursuit of power, and its emphasis on correct institutional practices. Later the Neapolitan philosopher would discover Hegel whose ill-fated conception, within the liberal tradition, of the state as the locus of an absolute power over the individual was considered the genesis of a form of totalitarianism. Moreover, Croce did not seem very interested in philosophers such as Bentham, Mill, Locke or Hobbes, and in his *Elementi di politica* these theorists, who belong to the liberal tradition, are hardly mentioned.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.,p.239.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.,p.240.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Bobbio's analysis hence underlines how Croce's pre-Fascist political conception, far from being liberal,

Era l'ideale politico, come ognuno vede, del perfetto uomo d'ordine, per il quale lo stato, questo ente ideale, sempre benefico perchè per essenza interprete dei bisogni e degli interessi collettivi, ha sempre ragione, e gli individui che cercano di perseguire i loro interessi come meglio possono, hanno sempre torto. Quanto di più illiberale, insomma, si potesse immaginare.<sup>67</sup>

Croce's attitude towards the state and its relations with individuals changed after 1925, when the philosopher penned his *Manifesto degli intellettuali antifascisti*. From that point, Bobbio argues, Croce's liberalism ceased to be a simple 'atteggiamento' and became part of his philosophical doctrine; his philosophy became 'una filosofia della libertà.'<sup>68</sup>

Henceforth, Croce's purpose was to tailor his philosophy of the Spirit to the needs of the new conception of Liberty which would become the core of his opposition to Fascism. However Bobbio, discussing the attitude of Croce in the early years of the Fascist dictatorship, maintains that

di fronte al fascismo Croce aveva assunto in quegli anni l'atteggiamento del conservatore, preoccupato delle minacce alla stabilità del vecchio stato che provenivano dall'avanzata delle classi popolari.<sup>69</sup>

This ancestral antipathy for the masses, for Bobbio, shows Croce's essentially antidemocratic attitude. This position would not have changed during the Fascist regime; for the Turin intellectual, Croce remained faithful to his southern conservatism, although he played a key role in defending the civil liberties of the Italians against tyranny. This was because Croce saw in the concept of Democracy nothing but

il trionfo del meccanico, meramente quantitativo, materialistico principio dell'egualitarismo. Per lui democrazia significava il dogma

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.242.

<sup>68</sup> 'Occorreva risalire ai principi, occorreva una filosofia della libertà ... Ai suoi avversari avrebbe avuto un argomento più solido da opporre ... : la sua filosofia, quella che essi avevano trascinato nella polvere delle loro meschine controversie, era una filosofia della libertà'. Ibid., p.22.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p.219.

dell'astratta eguaglianza di tutti gli uomini, vecchio anacronistico dogma settecentesco, superato dalla concezione storicistica che nella fase più matura del suo pensiero identificava senz'altro con la concezione liberale della vita.<sup>70</sup>

Bobbio argues that Croce's conception of liberty is a rather romantic one. It is not based on a genuine liberal tradition, but it is rather a sort of sentimental appeal to freedom.

Furthermore, the exclusion of the concept of Democracy from Croce's philosophy, compounding his total neglect of the British liberal democratic tradition, shows the theoretical weakness of the 'religione della libertà'. The conception of a 'religion of liberty' had a great appeal during the period of opposition to the dictatorship, when people of various parties were engaged in resistance, but it was insufficiently concrete to endure during a period in which democracy was in the process of being constructed. Croce's romantic connection between liberty and spirit produced a typical disregard for the actual forms in which the above-mentioned liberty is realized. Bobbio's remark on the 'filosofia della libertà' echoes that of Gramsci:

se il soggetto della storia è Spirito (e non l'individuo singolo di cui si occupa il liberale) e questo Spirito è per essenza creatore e quindi libero, non si può non escludere che esso per realizzare se stesso si debba poter servire tanto dei regimi liberali quanto di quelli non liberali e quindi l'esistenza dei regimi illiberali è perfettamente compatibile con la libertà della storia.<sup>71</sup>

It is important to stress once more that Bobbio does not minimize the role of Croce as the voice of opposition in Italy during the dictatorship; Croce was essential for the function he played as 'mentor of the opposition', and his cultural weight was widely recognized both in Italy and abroad. Bobbio intended to carry out a constructive critique on Croce, pointing out the fact that the Liberalism of the Neapolitan philosopher was not the centre of gravity of the *Filosofia dello spirito*. However, the force of Bobbio's attack raised a number of issues relating to the usefulness of Croce's 'system', and it seemed to attribute to Croce's thought a moral rather than philosophical status. Moreover, given Bobbio's own commitment to

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.249.

intellectual renewal, and the importance he attached to his own 'matrice liberale' within this process, his eagerness to dissociate Croce from the Liberal tradition, and essentially to confine his salutary influence to the past, was a powerfully disenfranchising statement in relation to Croce's contemporary relevance in the cultural politics of the time.

Whereas *Politica e cultura* criticises Croce's notion of Liberalism, *Cronache di filosofia italiana* by Eugenio Garin is a meticulous account of the first forty-three years of Italian intellectual history, itself seen through the influence of the Neapolitan philosopher. Croce is the methodological guide for Garin's analysis of what he took to be the most influential Italian intellectual figures in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through a wealth of documents including magazines and cultural publications of different kinds, Garin provides a comprehensive portrait of the intellectual atmosphere of pre-Fascist and Fascist Italy up to the beginning of the Second World War; a faithful 'chronicle' of the dramatic tensions seen through the eyes of the protagonists.<sup>72</sup>

Garin's analysis of Croce's cultural role is very sympathetic and takes into account both the philosophical and historical perspectives dominating intellectual life in Italy, although, at times, the Neapolitan philosopher seems to dominate excessively the whole scenario. The scholar shares Croce's opinion that philosophy is mainly historical criticism of the past read through the knowledge and needs of the present. Thus, in this spirit the *Cronache* look at developments in their historical and social context, trying to trace their genesis in doctrines and movements. The reading of Croce provided by Garin has become part of the classic understanding of Croce's work.

Like many of his contemporaries Garin was highly influenced by Croce as seen through the eyes of Gramsci. And, like Gramsci, Garin granted a privileged status to the Neapolitan philosopher considering Croce's political-cultural activity fundamental first for the fledgling Italian democracy, and subsequently for the opposition to Fascism during the dictatorship.

The image of Croce that Garin offers is a dynamic one: the Neapolitan philosopher was an intellectual actively engaged in the controversies of his time

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp.258-59.

possessing a genuine commitment to humanistic culture, philosophy and politics. Moreover, his was a versatile, anti-dogmatic mind exhibiting both a vivid intelligence and a strong sense of reality notwithstanding his idealistic perspective:

fin dalle prime esperienze fine Ottocento, il tema centrale del pensiero crociano fu un'esigenza di valori ideali, ma sposata a una rigorosa fedeltà, all'esperienza del reale.<sup>73</sup>

For Garin the most relevant part of Croce's work lies in the cultural commitment he encouraged with his bimonthly *La Critica* which, along with *Leonardo*, was the most popular politico-cultural magazine in Italy.<sup>74</sup> It is from the pages of *La Critica* that Croce continued his battle against positivism, a philosophical movement that had the tendency to impose the analytical and empirical methods of the natural sciences upon all domains of human knowledge. Hence, Croce counterposed a humanistic vision of culture to the all-pervasive determinism of the positivist movement.<sup>75</sup>

Garin describes extremely well the atmosphere of cultural stagnation in which Italy found itself at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and how Croce's periodical brought a breath of fresh air with its intellectual engagement:

La reazione del Croce si muoverà riaffermando da un lato le idealità dei valori, dall'altro... cercando di precisare, entro i confini rigorosi dell'esperienza umana, che cosa siano in concreto arte e storia, a quali forme di attività dell'uomo corrispondano, e come vadano attuandosi e svolgendosi.<sup>76</sup>

The *Cronache* do not discuss in great detail the specific problems in Croce's philosophy; the aim is rather to sketch a general interpretation in which one could distinguish 'what is living and what is dead' in Croce's thought and how some of his ideas could still be used to create a new intellectual culture.

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<sup>72</sup> E. Garin in *Cronache di filosofia italiana*: 'Si è guardato alle riviste e ai giornali, in cui le dottrine si affacciarono dapprima, o in cui discesero poi a combattere in una polemica o a volgarizzarsi in una propaganda.' (Bari: Laterza, 1966), p. xi.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>74</sup> 'La Critica del Croce, dal 1903, si era fatto lo strumento più valido per penetrare in ogni campo del sapere. Sopravvalutarne l'influenza nella storia del pensiero italiano di questo secolo è pressoché impossibile.' Ibid., p.172.

<sup>75</sup> In 1905 Croce famously wrote: 'tra le corbellerie che nel corso della vita si possono commettere con la filosofia e con gli studi in genere, ce n'è una della quale mi compiaccio di essermi tenuto puro, anche nei primi anni della mia giovinezza. Non sono mai stato positivista.' B. Croce, 'A proposito del positivismo italiano. Ricordi personali', now in *Cultura e vita morale* (Bari: Laterza, 1955), p.41.

<sup>76</sup> Garin, *Cronache di filosofia italiana*, p.188.



For Garin the most relevant elements of Croce's philosophy are related to its connection with Marxism which is seen as one of the main elements of influence in Croce's interest in history and politics. Indeed, the friendship between, and intellectual exchange with, the scholar Antonio Labriola gave Croce the opportunity to discover the thought of Marx, whose materialist approach to reality would condition the philosopher's vision. Although Croce later criticized many aspects of Marxism, Garin points out that the most modern part of his thought can be connected with historical materialism:

Quando[Croce], nella *Storia d'Italia*, andò contrapponendo all'esangue dialettica degli epigoni dell'idealismo tedesco, quella tutta sanguigna e carnale, tutta 'calda e viva' di Marx; quando al moto immobilmente fisso del Logo ricollocato in cielo, oppose una storia umana sospinta non già da cristallini e frigidì ideali, ma da 'forze' operose, e fossero pure bisogni e passioni 'materiali'; quando celebrò contro il moralismo una politica fatta di cose; e poi tutto il suo batter sul mondo, e tenersi legato all'opera mondana, e alla sua storia degli uomini e alle situazioni concrete; e quel suo studiarle e tramutarle: tutto questo si lega intimamente al suo contatto col marxismo.<sup>77</sup>

Thus Garin isolates the principal elements of 'realism' in Croce's philosophy, underlining their relations with Marxism. The Croce portrayed by the Rieti scholar is a philosopher with a strong sense of the practical who is constantly aware of the actual complexity of reality within history. However, the emphasis on Croce's 'realistic' works – particularly the *Pratica* and *La storia come pensiero e come azione*– is counterbalanced by the extremely critical review of the *Estetica* which indirectly

arrivò ... a dare aiuto a quelle tendenze di torbido idealismo che andavano celebrando un'orgiastica esaltazione dell'io che crea se stesso e il mondo, e la storia tutta, in un delirio di fantasia ebbra.<sup>78</sup>

Garin maintains that Croce's 'realism' was compromised by his subsequent adoption of Hegelian idealism. Croce's discovery of Hegel is related to his collaboration and constant dialogue with the younger philosopher Giovanni Gentile whose 'attualismo' was widely held to be a rigorous application of Hegelian

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.207.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p.239.

philosophy. For Garin it was under the influence of Gentile that Croce embraced an idealistic perspective to the detriment of his original realistic one<sup>79</sup>. From this point onwards Croce would try to reconcile the 'due anime' of his system,

quella dello storico ... e quella del 'logico', e verrebbe fatto di dir 'metafisico', legato ad una fraseologia hegeliana.<sup>80</sup>

Garin argues that Croce's embracing of idealism was powerfully influenced by the strong speculative tradition of the south of Italy, embodied in particular by Francesco De Sanctis and Bertrando Spaventa. Both intellectuals were considered part of the 'idealist' tradition. The former, a famous literary critic, provided a framework for Croce's *Estetica*, whereas the latter was the theoretical mentor of the so-called 'rinascita dell'idealismo'<sup>81</sup>.

Garin's labelling of Croce and Gentile as 'neoidealistic' created a perception of their work which was to achieve enormous influence. Henceforth, Croce and Gentile's philosophies would be indissolubly associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century speculative tradition of southern Italy. Although Garin does not reduce the complexity of Croce's thought to the influence of Spaventa and De Sanctis, nevertheless he seems to accept that there is a strong line of continuity between the two thinkers and the 'neo-idealism' of Croce and Gentile. I will analyze at a later stage the implications of this correlation in the reading of Croce's work.

Hence, for Garin Croce's embracing of Hegelian idealism was achieved only at the expenses of introducing a strong tension with his residual Marxian 'realism'. In effect, the price paid for the scope of his system of speculative philosophy was internal incoherence. Garin argues that the *Filosofia dello Spirito* is the result of an idealist turning point that he describes as

un'architettura esposta al pericolo di rendere statico... quello che era stato un mobile processo di ricerca<sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> 'Nè in quegli anni fu certo senza gran peso la collaborazione col Gentile di cui s'indovina, nel buono come nel meno buono la presenza: nell'averlo indotto a fare i conti con i grandi pensatori, ma anche, probabilmente, nell'averlo confortato nel disegno del trattato sistematico.' Ibid., p.242.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p.243.

<sup>81</sup> *La rinascita dell'idealismo* is also the title of a paper delivered by Gentile at the University of Naples in 1907.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp.223-24.

However, if Hegelianism was considered one of the open sources of contradiction in Croce's thought, its most serious flaw, according to the Rieti scholar, lies in the philosopher's aversion to science which eventually highlighted the inherent weakness of his whole system of thought:

Quanto al sapere scientifico ... l'impostazione crociana ... agì a lungo, e non sempre felicemente, sui rapporti con l'indagine filosofica che credette, a un certo punto, superato per sempre lo scoglio delle naturali investigazioni. Ed analoghi rilievi possono estendersi alla politica, all'economia, alla storia.<sup>83</sup>

The notion of 'pseudo-concept' contained in Croce's *Logica*, for Garin, asserted the substantially non-philosophical status of the natural sciences and inaugurated the split between the latter and the humanities. Fifteen years later in the appendix to the *Cronache* Garin would insist on this point maintaining that

Se di difetti e di limiti dell'idealismo si deve parlare, e se ne deve parlare, essi consistono nel non aver affrontato sul serio il problema di cosa fosse la scienza, appagandosi di relegarla nel campo degli pseudoconcetti; consistono nel non aver approfondito i problemi dei metodi delle scienze storiche, e cioè proprio di quelle discipline che accoglieva nell'ambito della 'scienza' effettiva, cioè dello spirito.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, one of Garin's major critiques of Croce lies in his alleged failure to provide more systematic and rigorous reflections on his historical methodology. Within the failure, however, of such a refined and accomplished historian of ideas as Garin to take seriously, and to see for what they are, Croce's anticipations of attacks on the 'grand narrative', we can see the limitations, not so much of an individual, as of a historical epoch in search of a 'progressive' narrative which would give it direction.

Perhaps a more explicitly Marxist critique of Croce is contained in the last text I am going to consider in this section, *La filosofia di Benedetto Croce e la crisi della società italiana* by Michele Abbate. Abbate claims to concentrate on the position and role of Croce during the first twenty-five years of the last century, but in fact he provides an overall critique of the Neapolitan philosopher's thought. Moreover,

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p.172.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p.595.

Abbate reinforces the association with 'idealism – southern Italy' already pointed out by Garin.

Another point worthy of note is the close relationship that Abbate sees between Croce and Gentile whose initial theoretical premises, in his view, are almost interchangeable:

Nei sistemi che Croce e Gentile venivano elaborando nel primo decennio del Novecento, non l'uomo in quanto concreta e dialettica storicità, ma lo Spirito e il Pensiero, proiezioni dell'attività alienizzante dell'uomo, venivano riposti come soggetto al centro della realtà.<sup>85</sup>

Interpreted from a strictly Marxist perspective, Croce and Gentile's thought represented a sort of setback<sup>86</sup> in the evolution of a socialist culture, since it neutralised the political drive present in thinkers such as Spaventa, De Sanctis and Labriola in favour of a virtually apolitical conception of intellectual inquiry. The result is, for Abbate, a purely speculative philosophy which is detached from historical reality:

Trasferendo nella regione dei 'concetti puri' questioni legate ai problemi dell'avanzamento materiale e spirituale dell'umanità in una ben determinata situazione storica, il Croce e il Gentile trasferirono in effetti la battaglia della grande cultura borghese liberale e razionalista italiana su posizioni di difesa di astratti valori metastorici, sottratti alla critica feconda e rinnovatrice delle prove reali e posti per definizione sul piano delle verità assolute, da custodire e portare indenni, attraverso i turbini del corso storico, dalle offese del materialismo e dell'empiria<sup>87</sup>.

Abbate argues that this tendency to abstraction, typical of idealism, moulded Croce's historical and political views and that it was the driving force behind his reaction to Positivism, and also behind the philosopher's aversion to the Enlightenment. Moreover, Croce's antidemocratic interpretation of Socialism is also the sign of a type

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<sup>85</sup> M. Abbate, *La filosofia di Benedetto Croce e la crisi della società italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1965), p. 53.

<sup>86</sup> 'L'operazione intellettuale che Croce e Gentile misero in atto al principio del novecento costituì... un obiettivo arretramento della cultura italiana e meridionale di tendenza hegeliana dalle posizioni su cui essa si era portata con Bertrando Spaventa e Francesco De Sanctis e più tardi in maniera profondamente innovatrice, con Antonio Labriola. Individuare la natura di questo arretramento ... è presupposto necessario per una ricerca come quella alla quale è dedicato questo libro'. Ibid., p.35.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p.47.

of thinking alienated from the concrete historical process, which Abbate links with the 'arretratezza' of the south of Italy with its 'semi feudal' system and consequently

nel ristagno reale ci si appaga di un progresso meramente razionale, nell'assenza di libertà come, civile, costruttiva operosità, signoreggiamento della natura in un mondo di rapporti umani in crescente sviluppo, ci si accontenta della 'libertà spirituale'.<sup>88</sup>

Therefore, for Abbate there seems to be a *direct* connection between the mainly agrarian society of southern Italy and its idealistic-intellectual output: this correspondence would have one of the most significant implications in relation to future criticism on Croce and would help to spread the stereotypical image of an industrial and progressive Italian 'settentrione' opposed to a sleepy agrarian 'meridione'.

Abbate also connects Croce's rejection of the concept of 'progress' with the philosopher's comfortable background and the difficulty from this viewpoint in dealing with concrete issues such as unemployment or redistribution of wealth. If progress does not exist, Abbate points out, there is no space for any advancement and the result of such a position is the legitimation of the status quo. Hence, for the Marxist scholar, the negation of any ideology of progress, along with the rejection of science, makes Croce a reactionary thinker with a strong hostility towards any political or social change. For Abbate Croce did not appear to see that the human struggle for progress is the driving force of all transformations and ignored

la storicità dei valori che nascono dalle vicende storiche stesse e si evolvono nel processo della coscienza sociale e divengono matrici della società umana attraverso il progressivo differenziarsi e rioperare di questa sull'ambiente materiale; ossia sono l'espressione di un continuo slargamento degli orizzonti umani.<sup>89</sup>

This attitude towards progress, far from being accidental, is in Abbate's view connected with the incapacity of a cultural and political elite to come to terms with the new challenges of a modern Italian society. Abbate sees Croce as the best known and most influential advocate of this deeply conservative outlook. It is a sort of *j'accuse* of the entire philosophical foundation of Croce's thought:

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p.57.

Il concetto che sono le minoranze a fare la storia, la reazione al positivismo spinta sino alla critica del valore conoscitivo della scienza e alla negazione dell'idea di progresso mostrano, in effetti, sin dalle prime maturazioni del pensiero crociano, la piegatura classista e conservatrice del suo sistema speculativo.<sup>90</sup>

The very origins of Croce's philosophy are for Abbate formed by this 'classist and conservative stance' which may be observed, for instance, in the philosopher's dismissal of socialism or in his definition of political parties as 'abstractions'<sup>91</sup>. Croce - Abbate insists, reinforcing the already mentioned Gramscian argument - was afraid of any social reform which would have implied a consequent loss of power for the ruling classes. This fear underlay Croce's adoption of a purely speculative position inimical to any practical outcome. Abbate also argues that in the process of expansion and consolidation of the Italian bourgeoisie any general reform or political change would have been seen as a threat to the established order. Thus, the reactionary outlook of Croce's philosophy is *inherent* in the system and not an inadvertent accoutrement.

In Abbate's interpretation of Croce's thought one can see a sort of review of all the arguments used by the progressive thinkers discussed earlier, namely southern Italian idealism, opposition to positivism, hostility towards socialism and democracy and political parties. However, Abbate's less generous interpretation adds a new dimension to the critique of the Neapolitan philosopher, in so far as it relates these arguments to Croce's early theoretical premises.

According to Abbate, Croce's distorted interpretation of socialism came from his 'storicismo conservatore' which tended to systematically downplay real political confrontation. This attitude could be traced back to the early works of the Neapolitan philosopher in which one could see a sort of fear of any kind of mass movement or social uprising. Abbate takes as an example Croce's initial neutralism during the First World War which for the Marxist scholar represented a sign of his conservatism. Indeed Croce's position is for Abbate similar to that of Giolitti - the then Italian prime minister- a very cautious one, being mainly concerned with the position of the middle class and its possible losses. Croce's later theory of state as 'potenza' to which the

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p.127.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>91</sup> 'Croce ... si sbarazzava di partiti e di classi nel mentre agognava l'unione di un'unico fascio di tutti i benpensanti.' Ibid., p.225.

individual has to submit, showed, for Abbate, the philosopher's true colours: the individual has to obey the state, namely the elites who are the holders of power; the masses, 'il volgo', follow. What Croce once called the 'law of history' is for Abbate nothing but the attempt to impose a conformist vision of the world with a

piattaforma ideologica .... di cui egli [Croce] era e si sentiva espressione e portavoce.<sup>92</sup>

Moreover, Abbate argues that the role of the individual in Croce's philosophy of history is a passive one, since one has to conform to the will of the Spirit, a transcendental force that limits human action and ultimately its freedom.

In conclusion, Abbate's critique of Croce's thought aimed to show the intrinsic

incapacità ... del filosofo di aprirsi alla storia salente dal basso, di intendere le più alte e universali ragioni, il più autentico umanesimo che sotto i suoi occhi, ma già in un secolo che non era più il suo, si facevano strada attraverso le rivendicazioni popolari e attraverso le lotte, il sangue ... delle classi proletarie.<sup>93</sup>

This analysis would deeply affect the understanding and access to Croce's philosophy for generations to come. Irrespective of the merits or otherwise of these critiques of Croce from writers in the 'progressive' arena, the *cumulative* effect of their attacks was considerable. Despite the positive features in the critiques of Gramsci, Bobbio and Garin, it was the negative features of Abbate's critique which seemed to crystallize and bring together those of the others, amounting to a massive cultural assault on the Neapolitan philosopher. The charged political atmosphere which dominated the powerful culture of the left in post-war Italy was not conducive to a judicious appraisal of the positive features of Croce's philosophy. The anti-Croce, it could be argued, was almost a historical necessity. Later generations would have to look back with new perspectives to do greater justice to Croce.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p.268. A modern version of this critique is represented by Ugo Dotti: 'Croce tradusse il pensiero di Marx in termini di antidemocratismo e di antilluminismo ... per approdare alla negazione della lotta di classe la quale, considerate come uno pseudoconcetto era destituita di qualsiasi verità scientifica.' U. Dotti, *Storia degli intellettuali in Italia. Vol. III. Temi e ideologie dagli illuministi a Gramsci* (Turin: Editori Riuniti, 1999), p. 239.

## 1.4 CRITIQUES FROM OTHER DIRECTIONS AND NEW TRENDS

Along with the attack unleashed by the ‘progressives’ there were other critiques from groups from heterogeneous cultural backgrounds which contributed to the marginalization of Croce’s role in contemporary debates during the post-war period.

The ‘liberation’ of Italy at the end of the Second World War was followed by a period of extreme euphoria for the newly acquired freedom. The North where the ‘Resistenza’ had started began to look for a total renewal of the Italian cultural and philosophical tradition. The models came from France (Sartre), Austria (Wittgenstein), Germany (Heidegger, Jaspers and Husserl), and the United States (James, Dewey and Peirce).

The proliferation of philosophical and cultural journals based in Milan, Turin, Florence and Rome was also part of this need for regeneration. Perhaps the magazine which best embodied the mood of this period was *Il Politecnico* founded by the writer Elio Vittorini in 1945 and published in Turin by the prestigious Einaudi publishing house. *Il Politecnico* did not have a well-defined political line, although it gravitated around the progressive area. The approach of the journal to literary and philosophical issues was at times amateurish, partly because of the young age of some of its collaborators, partly because of the ambitious range of subjects it covered. However, the journal exerted a considerable influence during the post-war period. For intellectuals like Vittorini the most advanced parts of Italian society, represented by the centre-north, wanted radical change. The models for this change should not be sought in the compromised ‘idealistic’ tradition. The aim of Vittorini was to promote a culture which was not detached from society and its problems. Indeed, the writer believed, with Gramsci, that this separation had brought about a great defeat for Italian civil society. Vittorini appealed to intellectuals from all backgrounds to contribute to a radical change which would lead to the creation of a new society.

In a well-known article entitled *Una nuova cultura*, published in the first issue, Vittorini advocated a drastic change in Italian culture:

Non più una cultura che consoli dalle sofferenze ma una cultura che protegga dalle sofferenze, che le combatta e le elimini.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> E. Vittorini, ‘Una nuova cultura’, *Il Politecnico*, 1, 29 September 1945, p.1.



The targets here were intellectuals 'di vecchio stampo' like Croce or Thomas Mann with their idly abstract speculations. What Italy needed at this point was a drastic break with the past:

La cultura italiana è stata particolarmente provata nelle sue illusioni. Non vi è forse nessuno in Italia che ignori cosa significhi la mortificazione dell'impotenza o un astratto furore. Continueremo, ciò malgrado, a seguire la strada che ancora oggi ci indicano i Thomas Mann e i Benedetto Croce?<sup>95</sup>

By now, for many young intellectuals, the name of Croce had already become a synonym for conservation opposed to change.

On the philosophical terrain, many young academics were attracted by new movements such as existentialism, neo-positivism, pragmatism and phenomenology. Indeed, a new generation of philosophers (Abbagnano, Preti, Paci and Geymonat among others) discussed the possibility of building an alternative to both Gramscian Marxism and 'idealism'. Philosophers like Ludovico Geymonat (1908-1991), rejected the whole preceding Italian philosophical tradition, maintaining that culture needed new instruments to face the challenges of the modern era. In an article which appeared in 1956 in the philosophical journal *Contemporaneo* under the title of 'Troppo idealismo', Geymonat charged even the 'gramsciani' with being the heirs to the old idealism against the new trends coming from Anglo-American culture:

La lotta degli 'scolastici'... contro i nuovi indirizzi filosofici, invece di approfondire le esigenze espresse da tali indirizzi e tentarne soluzioni veramente progressive, si limitò a condannarli in blocco, come li condannavano i superstiti dell'idealismo.<sup>96</sup>

What Geymonat advocated was a 'new rationalism' which had to be

ben più agguerrito e penetrante di quelli che caratterizzarono i secoli passati: esso deve ... essere aperto, cioè capace di affrontare i problemi sempre nuovi che la scienza e la prassi pongono innanzi allo spirito umano.<sup>97</sup>

Geymonat insisted particularly on a 'scientific method' for philosophical inquiry:

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> In G. Vacca, *Gli intellettuali di sinistra e la crisi del 1956* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1978), p.49.

Il nuovo razionalista non va alla ricerca di principi metafisici evidenti, eterni e indiscutibili sui quali fondare una scienza assoluta; ma si sforza di determinare con estrema precisione, di volta in volta, tutti i concetti con i quali opera, tutti i postulati dei quali si serve, tutte le trasformazioni che accetta come logicamente corrette. E poi, con spirito galileiano, tenta di modificare, ora i concetti, ora i postulati, ora i principi logici, per vedere cosa possa scaturire da tali modifiche.<sup>98</sup>

The most important philosophical centre in the country in these years was undoubtedly Turin, which acted as a sort of catalyst for the new intellectual trends. The *Rivista di filosofia* to which intellectuals such as Abbagnano and Bobbio contributed, became one of the most important philosophical journals along with the *Rivista di storia della filosofia* based in Milan. In fact *Rivista di filosofia* served as a sort of focus for the 'area laica', an intellectual strata which promoted a cultural agenda not fed by either the Marxists or Catholics.

In this context Nicola Abbagnano (1901-1990) played the essential role of thinker, historian of philosophy and cultural promoter. He tried to reconcile existentialism and pragmatism, rejecting any form of idealism. Abbagnano was for a philosophy which did not reject empiricism. However, philosophy was not a set of laws, but rather a project.

In an article entitled 'Morte o trasfigurazione dell'esistenzialismo', Abbagnano opposed existentialism to romanticism and idealism. Existentialism was a philosophy which was against any optimistic view with a predetermined vision of the world. Doubt and uncertainty had replaced any kind of consolatory rhetoric. We have to be aware of our limitations and our condition as mortal beings. There is no assurance of progress in history, and the risk of destruction is always present.

Romanticism and idealism, with their excessively positive perspectives ignored 'events' such as death, angst and illness relegating them to the realm of illusions.<sup>99</sup> We live in a problematic world which is neither entirely absurd nor rational, therefore we need a new form of Enlightenment that

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<sup>97</sup> L. Geymonat, *Studi per un nuovo naturalismo* (Turin: Chiaramonte, 1948), p.viii.

<sup>98</sup> L. Geymonat, *Saggi di filosofia neorazionalistica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1953), p. 23.

<sup>99</sup> 'Il romanticismo considera insignificanti certi aspetti negativi dell'esperienza umana come il dolore, lo scacco, la malattia, la morte perché essi non toccano il principio infinito che si manifesta nell'uomo e perciò non esistono per esso'. N. Abbagnano, 'Morte o trasfigurazione dell'esistenzialismo' *Nuovi argomenti*, xii (1955) pp.161-74, (p.161).

smessa l'illusione ottimistica dell'illuminismo settecentesco e il pesante dogmatismo del razionalismo ottocentesco, veda nella ragione ciò che essa è: una forza umana diretta a rendere più umano il mondo.<sup>100</sup>

Abbagnano's programme was articulated in three directions: dialogue with the natural sciences and their methodologies, particularly with the Anglo-American tradition; research for new approaches in the historical and social sciences; the rejection of rhetoric in philosophy. This ambitious programme of renewal of Italian philosophy was supported by a large proportion of intellectuals from different areas and was a sort of declaration of war against idealism.

However, the major influence of Abbagnano was exerted by his *Storia della filosofia*, a series of manuals on the history of philosophy to be used in high schools and universities, first published between 1946 and 1950. Abbagnano's perspectives on modern Italian philosophy would have a huge impact on future generations of Italians.

The reading that Abbagnano gave of contemporary Italian philosophy was that of an insular phenomenon developed during a dictatorship with virtually no original traits. If the assessment of Gentile's 'idealismo attuale' was rather sympathetic (Abbagnano had been a follower of the Sicilian philosopher and continued to see a vein of existentialism in Gentile's actualismo) his critique of Croce's philosophy was extremely harsh. Croce's 'system', Abbagnano argued, was a failed attempt to resuscitate the 19th century project of a 'romantic idealism':

La filosofia di Croce costituisce l'ultima e decisiva crisi dell'idealismo romantico. Questo idealismo che si presentava in Gentile ... pacificato e felice nella coscienza della perfetta identità tra finito e infinito, si presenta in Croce ... come contrasto di posizioni inconciliabili. Le esigenze e i problemi, che esso ha cercato di far suoi, rompono il quadro delle categorie predisposte e si rivoltano contro di esse.<sup>101</sup>

Indeed the Neapolitan philosopher is seen as a simple epilogue of Hegel's philosophy:

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<sup>100</sup> N. Abbagnano, 'Verso un nuovo illuminismo: John Dewey', *Rivista di filosofia*, 39 (1948), pp. 313-25 (p.325).

<sup>101</sup> N. Abbagnano, 'L'idealismo italiano', *Storia della filosofia*, vol.iii (Turin: Utet, 1993), p.539.

Lo storicismo crociano è radicalmente diverso dallo storicismo contemporaneo ... il quale è il *problema critico* della storiografia ... Lo storicismo crociano non è nient'altro che il razionalismo assoluto hegeliano.<sup>102</sup>

Croce, Abbagnano argued, had exerted a major influence on Italian culture, but his philosophical project was neither original nor coherent. It was rather a confused attempt to reconcile opposites. The idealistic system that Croce had built collapsed because of its own contradictions without any significant influence or prospect of continuity in the philosophical field:

Quest'opera ha esercitato molta influenza sulla cultura italiana fra le due guerre. Essa ha agito nello stesso senso della filosofia gentiliana, nonostante l'inimicizia personale dei due filosofi... Tuttavia non ha dato luogo, nel campo filosofico, ad alcun originale sviluppo ... mentre invece ha determinato nuovi orientamenti nella critica letteraria ed artistica ... Orientamenti che, tuttavia, vanno oggi rapidamente scomparendo anche dalla cultura italiana.<sup>103</sup>

The critique of Abbagnano, through the means of his school manuals, penetrated the cultural fabric of the nation, producing the image of an old-fashioned Croce with practically nothing to say to future generations. Thus, the partially positive appraisals of individual scholars like Bobbio or Garin were largely neutralized for the mass of the educated public. There have, however been small circles of enthusiasts, and also individuals, who have attempted to either keep alive or revive interest in Croce's contribution to Italian culture. As early as the late fifties the interest in Croce's thought was confined to the south of Italy, particularly in Naples where the interpreters have tended to emphasize both the moralistic and idealistic components of his philosophy.

Carlo Antoni, one of Croce's most distinguished interpreters, in his *Commento a Croce* portrayed the philosopher's thought as in tune with existentialism focusing almost exclusively on the 'spirituality' and 'morality' of his views:

La concezione crociana della vita è quella di un equilibrio instabile, d'armonia faticosamente raggiunta e difesa, sempre precaria, perchè sempre insidiata. Domina in tutta l'opera crociana il senso di questa

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p.526. See also Abbagnano's article 'L'ultimo Croce e il soggetto della storia', *Rivista di filosofia*, 45 (1953), pp. 300-13.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p.539.

costante immanenza della morte, condizione stessa della vita, e della sua funzione dialettica. Lo spirito è un fare che ha come suo opposto il non fare, quel nulla che si manifesta nel travaglio sterile, nell'accidia inconcludente, nel vuoto smarrimento.<sup>104</sup>

Books like that of Antoni, undoubtedly against the intentions of the author, reinforced the view of the Neapolitan thinker as a moralistic relic of the past.<sup>105</sup>

Another disciple of Croce, Raffaello Franchini in his *Croce interprete di Hegel ed altri saggi filosofici*, focused on the Hegelian component of Croce's philosophy arguing that the philosopher was

hegeliiano contro Hegel ma non senza Hegel, in quanto Hegel fu l'espressione più alta della filosofia, con cui, volere o no bisognava fare i conti.<sup>106</sup>

The historian Giuseppe Galasso, who had the great merit of editing a new edition of Croce's works in the late eighties, maintained that the philosopher 'ha rappresentato un ritorno alla grande tradizione della storiografia europea del '700 e dell'800'.<sup>107</sup> But the association of Croce's thought with 19<sup>th</sup> century thought, namely with Hegel and 'the great tradition of the seventeen and eighteen hundreds', has worked to the detriment of the philosopher since it has portrayed his thought as an epilogue of the past century rather than the expression of a modern thinker.

Indeed, the 'burial' of Croce has also been contributed to by the lack of critics who have been prepared to look afresh at his writings with a critical eye to the analytical assumptions underlying the major interpretative trends in Croce scholarship. The emphasis on the systematic, Hegelian project of the *Filosofia dello Spirito* made Croce's thought unappealing in an age where notions of system, truth and knowledge were being questioned.

A more recent interpreter of Croce, Gennaro Sasso, complained that the philosopher

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<sup>104</sup> C. Antoni, *Commento a Croce* (Venice: Neri Pozza, 1955), p. 150.

<sup>105</sup> See also the preface of Antoni's book in which he explains how 'nel quadro della filosofia crociana ciò che tendevo a definire altro non era che il venerando, ma quasi obliato concetto dell'anima, che tuttavia intendevo non come vecchia sostanza dei metafisici, ma, storicamente, come l'atto, che, nell'attimo ad esso concesso, realizza in sé, in maniera assolutamente singolare, l'universale spirito, che altrimenti non si manifesta.' Ibid., p.10.

<sup>106</sup> R. Franchini, *Croce interprete di Hegel e altri saggi filosofici* (Naples: Giannini, 1964), p.5.

<sup>107</sup> G. Galasso, *Croce, Gramsci ed altri storici* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1969), p.80.

malgrado la grande influenza esercitata, per circa quarant'anni, sulla cultura italiana, o forse proprio per questo, è oggi più noto che non realmente conosciuto, e accende bensì polemiche ma, per lo più stanche e ripetitive, di seconda mano.<sup>108</sup>

But perhaps part of the responsibility for this lack of interest in Croce's thought is due to the readings of many 'crociani' themselves. There is an undeniable tendency in Crocean studies to tie Croce's philosophy almost exclusively to his most systematic works – the *Estetica*, *Logica* and *Pratica* – in order to find a coherent, namely idealistic, line of continuity. The same Sasso, in his monumental *Benedetto Croce. La ricerca della dialettica*, aimed to show the complex 'idealistic' project of Croce's thought. Croce, according to Sasso, had attempted the 'last great philosophy of history', trying to expound the rationality of historical events.<sup>109</sup>

Moreover, Sasso insisted that a comprehensive critique of Croce's thought had to start from the 'linea unitaria e sistematica di questa filosofia'.<sup>110</sup> From this perspective all the elements that could not be included within this idealistic framework were considered either problematic or faulty. Thus Croce's whole philosophical project was read as a sort of dramatic journey towards the never achieved 'perfect system'. What remains to be saved is once more Croce's moralism:

La lezione di civiltà e, se la parola non fosse così logora, di umanità, che deve trarsi da questo pensatore, oggi così poco conosciuto e così poco letto, consiste certo nella coraggiosa meditazione sulla vitalità, sulla barbarie e sulla 'fine della civiltà', ma anche nel positivo anelito a non indulgere alla contemplazione delle tombe, a ricercare la vita, a non consentire a se stessi, innanzi tutto a se stessi i morbidi pensieri della decadenza, della rinuncia e della morte.<sup>111</sup>

Reading these texts one has the impression that the defence of Croce's philosophy has been fought with the wrong weapons. Perhaps it is worth reporting what Croce once said about the relationship between philosophers and his disciples:

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<sup>108</sup> G. Sasso in the preface to Croce, *Lettere a Giovanni Gentile* (Milan: Mondadori, 1981), p. vii.

<sup>109</sup> 'Quando, il 4 agosto 1943, i selvaggi furori della guerra si abbattono su quell'angolo di Napoli e le antiche mura di Santa Chiara bruciarono ... parve che nel tragico rogo bruciasse altresì l'ultima grande filosofia della storia.' G. Sasso, *Benedetto Croce. La ricerca della dialettica* (Naples: Morano, 1975), p. 1023.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1021.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1028.

Lo scolaro in quanto tale rappresenta l'accoglimento dell'esperienza mentale del passato ... Il maestro, che ha creato la teoria ... ne avverte precisamente i limiti ... conosce i punti sui quali ha accumulato le difese perché più facilmente vulnerabili ... Ma gli scolari proprio su questi punti più travagliati, perché più deboli, stimano i più forti, e vi si adagiano, e vi collocano pulpiti da prediche ... credono di asserire la verità con quella risolutezza ed energia che al maestro è mancata ed asseriscono l'esteriorità; immaginano di continuare e compiere il maestro, e ne hanno lasciato spegnere lo spirito animatore e progrediente.<sup>112</sup>

We have examined the major factors contributing to Croce's demise in post-war Italian culture. It now remains to show whether or not his philosophy has deserved this neglect.

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<sup>112</sup> B. Croce, 'Lo scolaro fedele', *La Critica*, ii (1917), 141-44 (pp. 141-42).

## CHAPTER TWO

### ESTABLISHING AN ANTIMETAPHYSICAL TERRAIN

#### 2.1 EARLIEST YEARS: CROCE'S INTELLECTUAL APPRENTICESHIP

The climate following the Second World War was not favorable to a dispassionate appraisal of Croce's thought. The 'operazione Gramsci' launched by the formidable communist machine of Togliatti on the one hand, and the attacks from both the fronts of the progressive area and the 'neoiluministi' on the other, did not leave space for an impartial debate on the value of Croce's philosophy. Another factor that played a part in Croce's demise was the lack of perceptive critics. We have seen how even ardent Croceans such as Antoni and Sasso played the game of the philosopher's detractors, considering Croce's philosophy as a sort of epigone of western systematic thought.

The image of Benedetto Croce as a detached conservative Neapolitan thinker busy writing his hefty volumes of the *Philosophy of the Spirit* has become part of the collective imagery, at least in Italy. This representation was in the process of being shaped while Croce was alive, and was consolidated in the decades after the philosopher's death. Certainly one direct effect of this portrait was to exclude Croce's thought from contemporary debate. His was a conceptual perspective which both Christian Democrats and Communists found difficult to relate to their immediate political and ideological needs. Moreover, on the socio-political level Gramsci appeared more modern than Croce, and on the purely theoretical terrain neither Croce nor Gentile seemed to be attuned to the new trends that began to dominate Western culture, namely phenomenology, existentialism and psychoanalysis.<sup>1</sup> Italians were eager to make contact with new cultural trends after living in a totalitarian state for twenty years.

The most important element that contributed to diminishing the reputation of Croce's philosophy in the postwar era was the widespread and notorious Gramscian definition of him as a 'papa laico' in the preceding period. Indeed 'lay pope' became an easy way of dismissing Croce's philosophy as parochial, out of date. The idea that Croce had spent his life ensconced in Naples, looking after his properties, cut off from

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<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Galasso has recently insisted on the persistence of this prejudice: 'La tesi di una separazione italiana, di una più o meno sopravvenuta e forzata provincialità ... è molto diffusa ... e ancor più diffusa ... è la tendenza ad addossare all'idealismo, e più propriamente a Croce, la responsabilità, per non dire l'iniziativa.' G. Galasso, *Croce e lo spirito del suo tempo* (Bari: Laterza, 2002), p. 304.



the rest of the world, created a stereotype which in different guises penetrated virtually all criticism on the philosopher.

These received perceptions of Croce are highly misleading. To begin to make my case in this chapter I will examine the early life and writings of the philosopher, along with those collaborative enterprises in which he made clear his *antimetaphysical intentions*. It will also become evident that he was anything but a leisured and wealthy dilettante in his youth.<sup>2</sup> In the case of his collaboration with Gentile it will be necessary to take the consequences of this joint venture into the 1930s. In successive chapters I will then examine the actual development of Croce's intellectual trajectory, one which, I will argue, was not the pursuit of a systematic programme.

Croce's life was much more turbulent than is usually portrayed. He was a real protagonist of his age, always actively engaged with philosophical, political and cultural issues. If we do not take this into account we will not be able to explain Croce's enormous popularity in the first fifty years of 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy. Indeed, very few thinkers can be compared with Croce when one considers the quantity and quality of his output,<sup>3</sup> let alone his precociously developed intellectual skills. Croce was also an extraordinary cultural promoter, always engaged in broadening the narrow boundaries of Italian culture. Indeed, the creation of the monthly *La Critica* was part of his cultural project aimed at modernizing and encouraging a critical attitude within the stuffy Italian intellectual world.

Benedetto Croce was born in Pescasseroli, a village near L'Aquila, in 1866, of a family belonging to the southern Italian haute bourgeoisie. He soon developed a passion for books which would last for the rest of his life:

Quando torno alla mia più lontana fanciullezza per ricercarvi i segni di quel che poi sono diventato, ritrovo nella memoria l'avidità con la

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<sup>2</sup> Galasso maintains that Croce's early writings were granted 'un'attenzione minore di quanto sarebbe stato opportuno.' Moreover, 'il collegamento o rapporto fra quel momento e l'avvio definitivo del pensiero crociano è stato assai poco, per non dire nulla indagato.' *Ibid.*, p.116.

<sup>3</sup> 'Croce pubblicò circa trentamila pagine e corresse le bozze di molte riedizioni e ristampe di settantadue volumi: quattro di *Filosofia dello Spirito*, quattordici di *Saggi Filosofici*, quarantaquattro di *Scritti di storia letteraria e politica*, dodici di *Scritti vari*. Senza contare le diverse redazioni di alcune opere, gli inediti taccuini autobiografici di viaggio e di lavoro, le postille all'eco della stampa e alle recensioni raccolte in una settantina di cartelle, e un immenso epistolario ... Nè sono da dimenticare le traduzioni (dai dialoghi di Erasmo alle massime di von Platen alle liriche di Goethe, dall'*Enciclopedia* di Hegel al *Pentamerone* di Basile, da Marullo a Hopkins), le edizioni di numerosi testi ... e le bibliografie ... di Vico e De Sanctis.' N. Badaloni, C. Muscetta in *Labriola, Croce, Gentile* (Bari: Laterza, 1977), p. 18.

quale chiedevo ed ascoltavo ogni sorta di racconti, la gioia dei primi libri di romanzi e di storie che mi furono messi e mi capitarono tra le mani, l'affetto pel libro nella sua materialità.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, at the end of his life, Croce had a library consisting of about seventy thousand volumes. He belonged to a family of five: Benedetto, his parents and two younger siblings, Alfonso and Maria. Croce's mother was the one who introduced the boy to books and the arts in general.<sup>5</sup>

At the age of seventeen Croce's life was struck by tragedy. In the summer of 1883 an earthquake occurred on the island of Ischia, near Naples, where the Croces were spending their holidays. Benedetto's parents and his sister were killed and from this point onward his life changed radically.

After the family tragedy, Croce and his brother Alfonso moved to Rome where their uncle Silvio Spaventa lived. Silvio had been imprisoned by the Bourbons during the struggle for Italian independence and had been a close collaborator of Cavour. At the time he was a member of parliament in the fledgling Italian state. He was one of the major exponents of the 'Destra Storica', now in opposition, and his house was a centre of debate and discussion on politics, history and philosophy for people from all political currents. Although Silvio believed that the State had to play a fundamental role in the organization of society, he did not share the Hegelian conception of the State<sup>6</sup> advocated by his brother Bertrando, a famous professor in the university of Naples. Silvio accepted a sort of regulative role for the state, keeping firm to the distinction between moral values, which are personal, and the State which looks after the common good without any intrusion in matters of ethics.<sup>7</sup> This position would influence Croce's political views.

Croce remembered the years in Rome as the saddest days of his life:

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<sup>4</sup> B. Croce, *Contributo alla critica di me stesso* (Milan: Adelphi, 1989), p.15.

<sup>5</sup> 'Mia madre aveva anche amore per l'arte e gli antichi monumenti; e debbo a lei il primo svegliarsi del mio interessamento pel passato, alle visite che con lei facevo alle chiese napoletane, soffermandoci innanzi alle pitture e alle tombe. In tutta la mia giovinezza ... quella mia intima e accarezzata tendenza era ... la storia'. Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> The most extreme interpretation of the Hegelian state conceives the State as the real bearer of moral values, in which individual moral values have to submit to the will of the state. The concept of 'Stato etico' would be reassessed by Giovanni Gentile in his attempt to give a philosophical legitimation to Fascism.

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the political differences between the Spaventa brothers see M. Bazzoli, *Fonti del pensiero di Benedetto Croce* (Milan: Marzorati, 1971), pp. 9-12.

Quegli anni furono i miei più dolorosi e cupi: i soli nei quali assai volte la sera, posando la testa sul guanciale, abbia fortemente bramato di non risvegliarmi al mattino, e mi siano sorti perfino pensieri di suicidio.<sup>8</sup>

However, at his uncle's house Croce had the opportunity to come into contact with a circle of journalists, politicians and academics. Among them was Antonio Labriola, teacher of moral philosophy at the University of Rome, who would become his mentor, and introduce Croce to the work first of Herbart and then of Marx<sup>9</sup>. Croce also tried to read the writings of his uncle Bertrando Spaventa finding them 'arid' and 'abstract':

La ragione fondamentale della mia scarsa simpatia per gli scritti dello Spaventa era nella profonda diversità d'indole che da lui mi divideva. Perché lo Spaventa proveniva dalla chiesa della teologia; e il problema sommo e quasi unico fu sempre per lui quello del rapporto tra l'Essere e il Conoscere, il problema della trascendenza e dell'immanenza, il problema più specialmente teologico-filosofico; laddove io, vinte le angosce sentimentali del distacco dalla religione, mi acquietai presto in una sorta di inconsapevole immanentismo, *non interessandomi ad altro mondo che a quello in cui effettivamente vivevo*, e non sentendo direttamente e in primo luogo il problema della trascendenza, e perciò non incontrando difficoltà nel concepire la relazione tra pensiero ed essere, perché, se mai, la difficoltà sarebbe stata per me il contrario: concepire un essere staccato dal pensiero o un pensiero staccato dall'essere.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, at this stage of his life, Croce had already abandoned religion and sought an alternative moral framework to give his life some sort of purpose. He also rejected any kind of transcendental philosophy, focusing instead on concrete answers to the questions he was interested in:

Ciò che veramente mi suscitava interessamento, e mi costringeva a filosofare per brame di luce, erano i problemi dell'arte, della vita morale, del diritto, e più tardi quelli della *metodologia storica*, ossia del lavoro che mi proponevo di esercitare. A questo vivo bisogno

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<sup>8</sup> Croce, *Contributo*, p.23.

<sup>9</sup> 'Nel secondo anno della mia dimora in Roma, mi risolsi ad ascoltare le lezioni di filosofia morale di Antonio Labriola, che già mi era familiare come frequentatore assiduo della casa Spaventa e che grandemente ammiravo nelle conversazioni serali, scoppiettante di brio e di frizzi e riboccante di fresca dottrina. E quelle lezioni vennero incontro inaspettatamente al mio angoscioso bisogno di rifarmi in forma razionale una fede sulla vita e i suoi fini e doveri, avendo perso la guida della dottrina religiosa.' Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.52. Italics mine.

nessun soddisfacimento trovavo negli scritti dello Spaventa, che mi respingevano altresì per la loro forma arida ed astratta ... così diversa da quella del De Sanctis, semplice, popolare, tutta cose, sempre in vivace ricambio con la vita reale.<sup>11</sup>

Although Croce was enrolled in the faculty of law he never took any exams and he found academic life boring and pretentious. He would retain this attitude towards academia for the rest of his life avoiding any university job. Indeed, years later he wrote a tirade against the university environment worth quoting at some length for the insight it provides into Croce's attitudes:

Nell'ambiente universitario si aggirano avventurieri senza coscienza, pronti a difendere qualsiasi tesi purchè appoggiata da personaggi che abbiano efficacia, se non mentale, pratica, pronti ad aggredire canagliosamente ciò che reputano ostacolo alle proprie mire personali. E vi sono manipolatori di scienza, che alla scienza sono stati chiamati da quella stessa vocazione per cui tanti indossano, o indossavano una volta, la cocolla o la zimarra. E vi sono poi coloro, che hanno conquistato la loro 'posizione scientifica'; che hanno definitivamente arredato il loro cervello come una casa nella quale si conti passare comodamente tutto il resto della vita; e questi ad ogni minimo accenno di dubbio e di discussione vi fanno il viso dell'armi, vi diventano nemici velenosissimi ... e, per salvare dalla morte i loro libri (come se non fosse questo il destino naturale di tutti i libri), preferiscono consacrarsi, essi stessi, alla morte intellettuale e spirituale. Ciò che costoro difendono con tanto ardore, non è più la verità, ma la verità materializzata, divenuta la 'posizione', che può essere anche la commenda e il senato, coronamento sospirato dalla carriera universitaria; tutto, fuorchè la fremente vita del pensiero.<sup>12</sup>

Croce's early intellectual life was characterized by research into local history, perhaps triggered by the death of his family. Croce wanted to know more about his origins as a southern Italian. Naples, with its rich historical legacy embracing connections with France and Spain, through the Anjous, the Aragons and Bourbons, became a microcosm to be explored by the young scholar. Indeed, in 1892 Croce founded the magazine *Napoli Nobilissima* with his poet friend Salvatore Di Giacomo.<sup>13</sup> The journal was one of the first attempts to narrate the cultural history of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.53. Italics mine

<sup>12</sup> B. Croce, 'Scienza ed università', *La Critica*, iv (1906), pp. 319-21 (pp. 320-21).

<sup>13</sup> The importance of *Napoli nobilissima* has recently been recognized by Thomas Willette in the essay 'È stata opera di critica onesta, liberale, italiana: Croce and Napoli Nobilissima (1892-1906)', contained in *The Legacy of Benedetto Croce. Contemporary Critical Views*, edited by J. D'Amico, D. A. Trafton and Massimo Verdicchio (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp.52-87.

the capital of the *Mezzogiorno* which was one of the most densely populated conurbations in the world.<sup>14</sup>

The young scholar was particularly interested in folk culture, namely in legends, myths, proverbs and folk songs.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in this period he began the translation from Neapolitan of the *Pentamerone* by Gian Battista Basile, an invaluable 17<sup>th</sup> century collection of folk tales.<sup>16</sup> He also wrote a number of monographs on the Neapolitan theatre, on heroines of the Neapolitan revolution of 1799 and on art sites. Furthermore, Croce revived the study of the *Commedia dell'arte*, writing a number of essays on the traditional masks of southern Italy. These essays are collected in *Saggi sulla letteratura italiana del seicento* (first published in 1911). At twenty-five he was already a celebrity among the learned, having published a series of works in Italy, France, Germany and Spain.<sup>17</sup>

The widespread neglect of this early historical research conducted by Croce, has contributed to the picture of a detached and abstract scholar.<sup>18</sup> This could not be further from the truth of the real picture of Croce's personality. There are many interesting elements which are usually overlooked. The first evident feature is Croce's interest in and concern for common people which conflicts with the usual image of a conservative thinker detached from the masses. The subjects of Croce's research are courtesans, fishermen, and various outcasts who try to make ends meet in a hostile environment. Folk knowledge, for Croce, far from being a merely bookish interest was the image of life in its concreteness without fiction and abstractions. Moreover, he found an evident correspondence between folk culture and philosophy, maintaining

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<sup>14</sup>See G. Galasso, *Lo sviluppo demografico in Napoli dopo un secolo* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1961), p.56.

<sup>15</sup>'Nella mia adolescenza ... raccolsi anch'io fiabe ... (o *cunti*, come si dice nel Napoletano) e canti (*canzoni*), assediando la lavandaia, il facchino e la serva di casa, e i contadini che vi capitavano nelle feste ... e anche in quel tempo lessi assai volumi di fiabe e canti di ogni parte d'Italia.' B. Croce, *Scritti di storia letteraria e politica*, vol. x (Bari: Laterza, 1918), p.245.

<sup>16</sup>'L'Italia possiede nel ... *Pentamerone* del Basile il più antico, il più ricco e il più artistico fra tutti i libri di fiabe popolari; come è giudizio concorde dei critici stranieri conoscitori di questa materia, e, per primo, di Iacopo Grimm, colui che, insieme col fratello Guglielmo, donò alla Germania la raccolta dei *Kinder und Hausmärchen*.' B. Croce in the introduction to G.B. Basile, *Il Pentamerone* (Bari: Laterza, 1974) p. xxvii.

<sup>17</sup>'Attraverso gli scritti eruditi Croce si era fatto conoscere anche fuori dell'Italia. Era ancora giovanissimo, aveva venticinque anni, e dietro di sé un bagaglio di minuta preparazione che segnerà la sua forma mentis per tutta la vita'. M. Corsi, *Le origini del pensiero di Benedetto Croce* (Naples: Giannini, 1984), p.184.

<sup>18</sup>Croce's writings on folk culture and southern traditions have been essential for the anthropologist Ernesto De Martino and for the collection of Italian tales edited by Italo Calvino. Furthermore, the writer Dario Fo used Croce's researches on the origins of the 'commedia dell'arte'.

that 'il senso comune... ha sovente ragione, perchè esprime l'impressione vaga e confusa della verità.'<sup>19</sup>

Thus, for Croce, proverbs, legends and folk traditions represented a precious cultural inheritance, essential for understanding the character and the customs of a society. Indeed, although popular culture was simpler and less sophisticated in style than 'high culture' it was nonetheless valuable for this. Its value lay in its authenticity and immediacy of feeling. This is in contrast to the general view of Croce's alleged 'elitist' and hierarchical distinction between the two.

For similar reasons Croce had a positive appraisal of dialects, which represented the link between varied languages and Italian. Thus his attention to local history was soon broadened into a wider interest in the European tradition. Indeed, between 1883 and 1886 Croce traveled throughout Europe, consolidating his knowledge of German, French, English and Spanish.<sup>20</sup> His interest in languages was stimulated by a genuine concern for the actual conditions of southern Italy, once a colony of the French and earlier of the Spanish. Moreover, both Croce's uncle Silvio Spaventa and Antonio Labriola insisted that the young scholar had to learn German which was considered essential for any serious student of the humanities. We miss a great deal, then, if we see Croce's youth as cocooned within a provincial environment, distant from the modern world. In reality Croce's interest in municipal history brought him into contact with the main European languages and the western tradition in general; the interest for the particular, for the fragment, was accompanied by a broader interest in European culture. Croce's travels around Europe were his first serious attempt to situate his studies on local history within a wider cultural context. Indeed, at that stage he was planning a work on the influence of Spain on Italian life.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> B. Croce, *Pagine sparse* (Bari: Laterza, 1960) p.475. See also *Frammenti di etica*: 'Amo assai il non-filosofo, l'incommosso, l'indifferente alle dispute e distinzioni filosofiche, che possiede la verità in pochi e semplici principi, in limpide sentenze, guide sicure al suo giudicare e al suo operare.' *Frammenti di etica* (Milan: Adelphi, 1994), p.230.

<sup>20</sup> Elena, Croce's daughter, reported: 'Mio padre parlava il francese con grande padronanza ... e molto correntemente anche il tedesco ... Non aveva mai fatto nessuno sforzo per acclimatarsi alle difficoltà di pronuncia della lingua inglese. Queste tre lingue, e naturalmente lo spagnolo e il portoghese (aveva anche, da giovane, studiato l'olandese e le lingue scandinave) le aveva comunque assai familiari ... Col latino e il greco aveva l'assoluta confidenza di un uomo colto del suo tempo. E. Croce, *Ricordi familiari* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1962), p.39.

<sup>21</sup> 'Mi misi a vagheggiare ... un nuovo lavoro, che sarebbe dovuto innalzarsi ... alla storia nazionale; e questa medesima pensavo di trattare ... non come cronaca di avvenimenti, ma come storia dei sentimenti e della vita spirituale d'Italia, dal Rinascimento in poi. E, giudicando che questa storia non sarebbe stata fattibile senza una particolare conoscenza delle relazioni tra la civiltà italiana e i popoli stranieri e senza l'indagine dei loro reciproci "influssi", quasi parte e preparazione del lavoro più generale mi accinsi a investigare l'influsso della *Spagna nella vita italiana*.' Croce, *Contributo*, p.30.

Feeling that he had to provide a more solid theoretical foundation for the great variety of his interests, Croce wrote, in 1893, *La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte*, his first philosophical work. The philosopher, however, would retain for the rest of his life the passion for both folk tradition and the unique value of particular historical events, no matter how insignificant they might appear.

## 2.2 HISTORY SUBSUMED

This part of the chapter will be devoted to the very first phase of Croce's philosophical thought, the two years between 1893 and 1895. The papers examined here were the earliest attempt by the young scholar to give a coherent framework to his studies in the humanities, namely in art and history. He also began to question the role of history within the theory of knowledge.

Croce's debut in the philosophical arena began in Naples at the Accademia Pontaniana in 1893 where he delivered, as a paper, his *La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte*. Its main aim was to examine the nature, the value, and the limits of historical knowledge. It was a dispassionate quest for an intellectual taxonomy which would prevent history from being considered as a science concerned only with the collection and analysis of empirical data. The young researcher therefore sought an epistemological foundation on which to base his work in history and literature, which remained his primary fields of inquiry.<sup>22</sup>

In the preface to his early works published in 1918 Croce explained the reasons for this defence of history:

In quel tempo il filosofo che godeva maggior fama e seguito in Italia era lo Spencer ... e con lui tanti altri positivisti ed evoluzionisti ... La mia prima azione critica si configurò, dunque, come opposizione a quell'andazzo disordinato e impetuoso, e segnatamente a quelle forme di esso che investivano e travolgevano le ragioni stesse degli studi, da me coltivati, della letteratura e della storia.<sup>23</sup>

Positivism was a philosophical movement characterised by an emphasis upon science and scientific method as the *only* sources of knowledge, a sharp distinction between the realms of fact and value, and a strong hostility towards religion and traditional philosophy, especially metaphysics. An outgrowth of the empirical tradition, positivism was first introduced into the philosophical vocabulary in the early 19th century by Saint-Simon. As developed by Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Ernst Mach, and others, the movement had great influence in philosophy well into the 20th century. Hostility towards traditional thought was especially strong in Comte and

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<sup>22</sup> In an article in the French *Revue de synthèse historique* dated 1902 Croce explained: 'Donc, m'occupant ... des recherches relatives à l'histoire politique et littéraire, et tourmenté par un doute qui portait sur la valeur et les limites de la connaissance historique, je fus engagé par là à reprendre le problème du caractère de l'histoire.' B. Croce, *Primi scritti* (Bari: Laterza, 1951), p.181.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.ix.



Spencer, who denied the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, which they held to be a stagnant and useless branch of inquiry. They were suspicious of any proposition (including scientific hypotheses) that was incapable of being reduced to *direct observation*. Positivism thus redefined the purpose of philosophy, limiting it to the analysis and definition of scientific language. Positivism's opponents saw the advances of the movement, with its tendency to extend the empirical and analytical methods to all enquiries, as threatening the core of humanistic studies. Croce's 'battle' against Positivism was within this context.

In his 1893 lecture Croce was strongly influenced by the Italian thinkers Francesco De Sanctis and Antonio Labriola who initiated, in Italy, a polemical engagement with determinism and evolutionism in literature and history respectively.<sup>24</sup> Croce admired in De Sanctis the passion for literature and the idea that criticism in the humanities had to be *internal* to the disciplines themselves. This view opposed the reductionism which advocated application of the 'scientific method' in all fields of inquiry as being the *only* reliable path to knowledge, itself conceived exclusively in terms of scientific laws. Antonio Labriola's anti-academic approach, his concern for a culture not detached from everyday life, his interest in the philosophy of history, were all extremely important for the intellectual development of Croce.

Croce's lecture, which forcefully argued that history was an art and not a science, has often been seen as a profession of faith in idealism. Some Italian cultural historians, among them Norberto Bobbio, note that the Neapolitan philosopher, reacting to the overwhelming determinism of the positivists, embraced the 'rinascita dell'idealismo'<sup>25</sup>. Hence, the central feature of the paper is usually considered to be the critique of the positivist method when applied in fields like history and the arts, and the subsequent adoption of an idealistic stance. However, a careful reading reveals that in the paper there is no relevant reference to idealism as a philosophical doctrine and the few allusions to Hegel are quite critical.

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<sup>24</sup>'Nascevano queste ... tesi ... da quanto d'allora avevo finora appreso nello studio degli scritti del De Sanctis, da una certa disciplina logica ... che fin dal liceo mi aveva dato un tomistico insegnante di filosofia, e che si era rinvigorita nell'università con le lezioni del Labriola, antipositivista ed antievoluzionista.' Ibid., p.x.

<sup>25</sup>'Il positivismo aveva fatto della scienza, in special modo della scienza naturale, l'alfiere di ogni forma del sapere umano; l'idealismo la rimise nei ranghi ... La forma di conoscenza che i positivisti esaltarono fu quella propria delle scienze della natura, gli idealisti contrapposero alla scienza della natura come conoscenza del generale, la filosofia come sapere universale.' Bobbio, *Profilo ideologico del novecento italiano*, p. 75.

Indeed, in a paper entitled *Illustrazioni e discussioni*, delivered a year later, referring to his philosophical position in the 1893 paper Croce made the point:

non sono hegeliano, come taluno mi ha qualificato a proposito dello scritto sulla storia, che è invece spiccatamente antihegeliano ... una delle più assurde concezioni della storia è appunto quella che Hegel offre nella sua *Filosofia della storia*.<sup>26</sup>

The embarrassed silence on this statement among Croce commentators is almost deafening. Moreover, Croce's negative attitude towards positivism, which has often been overstated and used mercilessly against him, is not by any means the hub of the lecture, despite his later statements. In fact, in *La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte* there is no evidence of a prejudicial attitude towards the natural sciences and Croce's criticism is directed only at the *abuse* of the above-mentioned methods in other disciplines.

One can show in fact through analysing Croce's epistemological position in these years, that the philosopher was somewhat in awe of scientific disciplines, and that, at this stage of his philosophical development, he had not questioned the 'privileged' status of the natural sciences. Only later in his intellectual itinerary would the Neapolitan philosopher reformulate this early distinction between science and history and then maintain that the latter enjoyed epistemological priority in the classification of disciplines.

However, the importance of the paper does not lie in the correctness or otherwise of the above-mentioned categorization of history within art. It lies rather in its pointing out the necessity of *questioning* the methods of inquiry in humanistic disciplines, given that that they cannot be classified among the 'exact sciences'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, from the very start of his philosophical career Croce sought a distinctive method of inquiry for historiography and literature. And from the outset Croce's search was undertaken in relation to the wider debate concerning the nature of history

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> Collingwood was the first who noted the relevance of the paper in this respect: 'Only one fertile suggestion was made during this period, and this was made by a young Italian whose experience of historical work and literary criticism gave him a fresh and first hand view in the subject ... Benedetto Croce in 1893, boldly drew the conclusion that art and history were the same thing. This pronouncement had nothing to do with the trite observation that the historian must be also an artist in so far as he must, incidentally, express himself in prose which ought therefore to be good prose ... This did not solve the problem but it brought matters to a head.' R. G. Collingwood, 'The philosophy of history', *Historical Association Leaflet* n. 79 (London, 1930), p. 12.

and its methods being conducted in Germany. Indeed, there are a number of references to philosophers such as Droysen, Dilthey and Simmel in his debut paper.

This debate was, in fact, one of the most important intellectual issues in Germany at that time. The celebrated neo-Kantian Baden school, to which eminent philosophers such as Dilthey, Windelband, and Rickert belonged, claimed for history in particular, and the humanities in general, methodological criteria of their own. The work of thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) was a sophisticated attempt to construct a ‘critique of historical reason’ which would grant validity to the sciences of the spirit (*Geisteswissenschaften*) considered as fundamentally different from the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*). Broadly speaking, the neo-Kantians defined history as a discipline which focuses on the particularity of products of human culture (myths, legends, values, customs, arts, philosophies etc.) This consideration of the objects in their particularity which characterizes the ‘sciences of the spirit’ was contrasted with the focus on uniformity and repeatability as expressed in the universal laws of the natural sciences. Whereas the scientific method is able to generalize and define by means of causal laws (*Erklären*), the historical method necessarily relies on comprehension (*Verstehen*), namely the capacity to identify feelings, emotions and thoughts of other people.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1893 lecture Croce appeared to accept that part of the neo-Kantian critique which rejected the trend in historiography to imitate the methods of the natural sciences. Indeed Croce was fully aware of the ongoing debate in Germany about the function of history, since he talked about its developments ‘nei metodi della ricerca e della critica come in quelli dell’interpretazione e della comprensione’<sup>29</sup> and his paper was heavily based on these arguments. Thus, when the young scholar characterized the specificity of the arts, he provided an answer which was in tune with that of the German neo-Kantians:

O si fa *scienza* ... o si fa *arte*. Sempre che si assume il particolare sotto il generale, si fa *scienza*; sempre che si rappresenta il particolare come tale, si fa *arte*.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See M. Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp.188-89.

<sup>29</sup> Croce, *Primi scritti*, p.4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

A further insight into Croce's epistemological development is given by the already mentioned 1894 lecture at the Accademia Pontaniana, *Illustrazioni e discussioni*, a polemical answer to the detractors of his philosophical debut. Here Croce draws the distinction between 'scienze di concetti' or 'proprie' and 'scienze descrittive' or 'improprie'. Whereas the former deal with concepts, 'descriptive sciences' deal with facts. To the first category belong mathematics, physics, mechanics, chemistry, anthropology, psychology as well as logic, ethics, aesthetics, law and so forth. The second category groups disciplines like statistics, geography and cosmography. History and the arts belong to the descriptive group since they deal with facts, with 'individuals' or 'particulars', not with concepts:

Due grandi categorie di conoscenze, le scienze di concetti e le scienze descrittive restano così formate; e le prime sono ... scienze dei principi della realtà ... e tra le seconde la descrizione e la storia del *globus naturalis* non meno che del *globus intellectualis* ... La differenza tra questi due gruppi è più profonda di quel che non sembri a prima vista; perché le prime conoscenze mirano a un concetto, le seconde a un fatto, le prime oltrepassano le cose particolari, le seconde si immergono in esse.<sup>31</sup>

We can see from this distinction that at the time Croce, far from being hostile to the sciences, had a respectful view towards them when applied in their proper domain. Indeed, his distinction between arts and sciences was purely normative and not hierarchical; therefore the two forms of knowledge were equally important although they had distinct functions.

Thus, at this stage of his thinking Croce simply advocated a more well - defined status for the humanities since he noted that

la categoria *generale* che comprende l'*arte* e la *storia* e le altre produzioni simili, non è stata ancora riconosciuta nella sua intera estensione ed intrinseca natura.<sup>32</sup>

From what has been argued so far, we can infer that:

1) Despite the traditional reading of Croce's early thought, his attitude towards positivism and natural sciences in general was not prejudicial, but rather sympathetic.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp.64-65.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.66.

Indeed the young philosopher did not question the supremacy of the natural sciences.<sup>33</sup> He defended the analytical features of natural science and criticized the misuse of them when applied to the arts.

2) Croce started his philosophical career not with a preconceived set of rules, or an idealistic metaphysics, as mainstream interpreters claim<sup>34</sup>, but with a concrete need to understand the epistemic value of the humanities, specifically history and literature. Thus the question of *La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte*, far from being an idle one, involved a discussion about the value and purpose of history as a theoretical form of knowledge.

3) The debate on history, far from being an internal feud between Italian positivists and anti-positivists, was part of a much larger debate with international interlocutors. And the young Croce entered the fray equipped both with a considerable background as a historian of local history, and an engagement with the concerns of the wider international cultural community.

If we now go on to consider the group of papers between 1893 and 1895 in their original features, we find that the most striking feature of these papers is their radical questioning of the premises of historical method.

We already know that Croce in *La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte* described history as a 'genere di produzione artistica che ha per oggetto della sua rappresentazione il *realmente accaduto*'.<sup>35</sup> Thus, although history is classified under the category of the arts, it nevertheless describes 'real events'. The stress here is placed on the narrative. But this is not to be mistaken for a simple narration of empirical events. Indeed, Croce maintained that

La storia ha un solo ufficio: *narrare fatti*; e quando si dice narrare fatti, si intende altresì che i fatti debbono essere esattamente raccolti e mostrati quali sono realmente accaduti, ossia ricondotti alle loro cause

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<sup>33</sup>Charles Boulay has rightly remarked that 'en revenant sur sa jeunesse dans des écrits autobiographiques, Croce a incontestablement exagéré son opposition au positivisme au cours de sa formation culturelle, et ceux qui se sont occupés de ce moment de sa pensée, comme Mario Corsi et même Emilio Agazzi, ont à peu près négligé cette composante.' *Benedetto Croce jusque'en 1911* (Geneva: Droz, 1981), p.xii.

<sup>34</sup> See for example Emilio Agazzi who, in his highly influential book, maintained that: 'La sua prima "sistemazione filosofica" il Croce la tentò ... nella memoria del 1893 sulla storia e sull'arte ... Ed il compito primario della stessa indagine filosofica, di cui nella memoria Croce aveva fornito un primo esempio, risiedeva per lui nella difesa di quei tradizionali valori contro le negazioni e le contaminazioni empiristiche, materialistiche e relativistiche.' *Il giovane Croce e il marxismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962) pp.554-55.

<sup>35</sup> Croce, *Primi scritti*, p.38.

e non già esposti estrinsecamente come appaiono all'occhio inesperto.<sup>36</sup>

There is no such thing as an 'innocent' recounting of factual events.

The philosopher also considered the preliminary work or 'lavori preparatori' that historians need to undertake in order to write a historical account. For Croce this work of research is essential but it cannot be defined as history:

Lo storico, prima di procedere alla sua rappresentazione, prima di *narrare*, ha bisogno di approntare la materia da esporre; e i suoi lavori preparatori si chiamano la ricerca, la critica, l'interpretazione, la comprensione storica, e sono più o meno agevoli e talvolta ottengono pieno effetto e talvolta no. Formano essi una sterminata produzione letteraria, rispetto alla quale i lavori di storia narrativa sembrano piccola minoranza. Ora, codesti *lavori preparatori* sono essi storia? La stessa posizione della domanda include la risposta. Certo che no.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, what Croce calls history tout court is the completed narrative, as distinct from the preliminary research on documents and sources. History here is not seen simply as a mere collection of data or a chronological registering of events, but rather an act of interpretation.<sup>38</sup> In reality, without narrative one cannot talk about history. We need to know then what this history-narration consists of. Croce argued that

prima condizione per avere storia vera ... è che sia possibile una narrazione. Ma costruire una narrazione compiuta è qualcosa che non accade di sovente; e perciò la definizione che abbiamo data della storia rappresenta un ideale che di rado riesce allo storico conseguire. Nella maggior parte dei casi, non si possono offrire se non ... esposizioni frammentarie, turbate da discussioni e da dubbi e da riserve.<sup>39</sup>

When one tries to construct a historical account, one encounters a number of obstacles caused essentially by two factors: the (lack of) sources and their interpretation. Indeed, often historians have to supplement the evidence with theories

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp.18-19.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.39.

<sup>38</sup> I do not, however, agree with Mario Corsi that Croce does not distinguish between history and chronicle. Indeed, the whole argument of these early papers is based on this distinction. A simple list of events put in chronological order is not history for the Neapolitan philosopher. If we do not consider this essential distinction we cannot explain why 'Croce ... riconosce che storia è "elaborazione artistica" e quindi non semplice ripetizione del dato.' M. Corsi, *Le origini del pensiero di Benedetto Croce*, ibid., p.64. For Croce's own discussion of this issue see Croce, *Primi scritti*, pp.36-41.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.38.

and suppositions. Therefore, although the aim is the achievement of an objective historical narration, the subjective element is already present at this very first stage: facts and interpretations influence each other.

Moreover, Croce mentioned another element connected with the presentation of facts which he regards as an essential component of historical narration:

La storia ... sceglie, ossia rappresenta non tutte le cose indifferentemente, ma, ogni volta ciò che le *interessa*.<sup>40</sup>

This last statement makes things more complicated: history does not simply narrate, it *selects* certain elements for its narration; it does not simply report whatever happened, it chooses according to a certain 'interest'. Thus, on the one hand subjectivity is an obstacle for writing history, since it is present within the selection and construction of any interpretation; on the other hand the same subjectivity with its 'interest' in certain facts is the driving force of historiography. Indeed the subjective element is crucial at all stages of the historical narration. The nature of this interest is not fully explained by Croce and contains a number of blind spots.

Part of the problem lies in the connotations that Croce gives to 'interest', two meanings of the term corresponding to the meanings we would give it in English, in the two following statements: 'what an interesting day' on the one hand, and 'he gave the money out of self interest' on the other. The first of the usages was in Croce's mind an 'aesthetic' statement. Do historians follow an aesthetic criterion when they select certain facts? Given the association of art and history, Croce's early taxonomy seems to suggest this reading. The development of Croce's conception of 'interest' is a key to understanding the sense of his specific inquiry. At this early stage its sense is aesthetic. With an 'aesthetic view' the stress falls inevitably on the *rhetorical* purpose of historical narration with little concern for the real forces which mold this interest. However, soon the philosopher would abandon the original association and elucidate the nature of this 'interest' with the help of Marxism which is the subject of the next section of the chapter.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.56. Italics mine.

<sup>41</sup> At a later stage we will see how this deep-rooted conviction of Croce's concerning the importance of 'interest' in the historiographical enterprise acquires additional dimensions. Namely, the way in which 'interest' takes the form of concern, with a moral dimension, and also the way in which one's own inescapable cultural conditioning will always ensure that readings of the past make all history 'contemporary.'

Despite some ambiguities in these early papers, Croce's emphasis on the nature of historical inquiry as 'interest' draws our attention to the issue of *objectivity* in historiography. Indeed, if one accepts the statement that history is driven by 'interest', one has to admit that in the act of reporting events from the past there is no complete objectivity, there are no 'pure facts'. The consequences of this important statement will be dealt with at a later stage. However, this conception of (historical) knowledge, which we will later see as an intrinsic component of his anti-dogmatic philosophy, is one of Croce's fundamental tenets.

In a lecture entitled *Intorno alla filosofia della storia* delivered in 1895, Croce drew together the conclusions of his early reflections on history. We have already seen that Croce stressed how in history and the arts the use of narrative leads inevitably to a level of subjectivity. When one solves a mathematical equation the degree of subjective judgment is practically non-existent. Something different happens when one gives an opinion about a work of art or attempts a historical account. The latter practices have a strong subjective component; indeed they are based on 'individual judgments':

La storia tratta non di fatti, avvenimenti, azioni e persone ... ma di *questo* fatto, di *questa* persona e via dicendo. [La] scienza ... cerca il generale ossia quel che esiste in tutti i singoli oggetti...[la storia] il singolo come individualità concreta.<sup>42</sup>

It is, at this point, important to distinguish between different meanings of 'interpretation'. In Croce's view, although the ineradicability of 'interest' and 'subjectivity' necessitate 'interpretation' for the narrative to be complete, a different set of problems arises when the historian attempts to employ ready-made, grand schemes of interpretation. Croce sees the latter as the imposition of 'metaphysics' onto the narrative. The interpretations required by 'subjectivity' and 'interest' are intrinsic to the representation of the real; 'metaphysics', whether treating of God or idealism is extrinsic:

La storia la facciamo noi stessi tenendo conto, certo delle condizioni obiettive nelle quali ci troviamo, ma coi nostri ideali, coi nostri sforzi,

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<sup>42</sup> Croce, *Primi scritti*, p.18.



con le nostre sofferenze senza che ci sia consentito scaricare questo fardello sulle spalle di Dio o dell'Idea.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, the very concept of 'philosophy of history' is questioned here. Historical events do not accept any external cause such as Providence, Reason, Idea, becoming, which for Croce all represent the presence of God in disguise:

La filosofia della storia è stata a lungo considerata come una sorta di *rivelazione del significato* della storia, alla quale si perveniva col scrutare i disegni della Provvidenza o col determinare il ritmo della Ragione, dell'Idea, del divenire universale o in quali altri modi si è chiamato il travestimento del vecchio Dio.<sup>44</sup>

As a result of this critique any philosophy of history is seen with suspicion, as a 'mythology' which aims to ape the natural sciences with its faith in an all encompassing Principle or Rule. On the other hand, the questions that history poses are a part of the real world, which is complex and multifaceted, and they are peculiar to this discipline:

Trasportata la considerazione storica dal mondo ideale al mondo reale, era naturale domandarsi: ... Come nascono, si trasformano e muoiono le istituzioni sociali? In qual modo si viene svolgendo, per esempio lo Stato e il costume morale? - Queste ed altre domande simili formano un ... gruppo che si è chiamato dei *principi reali* ... o dei *concetti* sotto i quali pensiamo la storia.<sup>45</sup>

At this stage of his thought Croce did not possess a well-defined epistemic framework within which to situate all these issues. Nevertheless he had already focused his attention on some important features such as the crucial role of *narration* and *subjectivity* in history and the distinction between historiography and the group of disciplines which speculate about the final meaning of history in metaphysical terms. Hence one cannot agree with critics like Roberts when he maintains that 'Croce's position was quite conventional' since 'he had not yet questioned the notion of a stable, determined reality of the past'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.68.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.67.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.68.

<sup>46</sup> Roberts, *Benedetto Croce*, p.39.

The attention of the young thinker was also focused on more concrete concerns such as the search for a reliable and flexible methodology, which would answer the following questions:

Con quali presupposti e con quali metodi si ritrovano e integrano i dati della tradizione? Quali sono l'estensione e i limiti dell'affermazione dello storico? Quale valore logico ha la congettura storica?<sup>47</sup>

Paradoxically, the encounter with Marxism would reinforce Croce's early skepticism for *definitive* historical accounts and make him aware of some other 'forces' operating in the historical investigation. Paradoxically, since the question which naturally comes to mind is: would this not lead him to the 'metaphysics' he seemed anxious to avoid?

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<sup>47</sup>Croce, *Primi scritti*, p.68.

### 2.3 DECONSTRUCTING MARXISM

Generally speaking, Croce criticism has not dealt justly with his reading of Marx. Widely seen either as an early flirtation in which the glamour wore off,<sup>48</sup> or as an interesting approach abandoned in preference for an idealist one,<sup>49</sup> the lasting influence on his antimetaphysical method of this early contact with Marxism has been overlooked.

In April 1895 Croce received a letter from his friend and mentor Antonio Labriola:

È uscito a Parigi il primo fascicolo ... del *Devenir social*, 'organo marxista'. Ci scriverò anch'io: come di fatto ho già mandato un lungo articolo-monografia. Fui pregato di procurare degli abbonati. Permettetemi di fare il vostro nome. Son certo che ci troverete da leggere. E a proposito dell'articolo mio: mi permettete di mandarvene il manoscritto? Vedrete voi se sia il caso che io ne faccia un opuscolo.<sup>50</sup>

The article sent by Labriola, *In memoria del Manifesto dei comunisti*, had a great impact on the young Croce who reported:

Stavo allora sui ventinove anni, ero passato attraverso molteplici prove di studi in letteratura, filologia, e filosofia, e, inconsapevolmente, per un intimo bisogno morale, mi venivo rivolgendo all'indagine del problema della storia ... cosicché attesi con molta aspettazione il manoscritto del suo articolo ... e quando lo ebbi ricevuto, lo lessi e lo rilessi, la mente mi si riempì di visioni e concetti per me nuovi.<sup>51</sup>

Antonio Labriola (1843-1904) was one of the most prominent European intellectuals writing on historical materialism and had regular correspondence with

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<sup>48</sup>After a youthful flirtation with Marx and other forms of socialism, Croce became a liberal.' Introduction to D'Amico, Trafton and Verdicchio, *The Legacy of Benedetto Croce*, p.10.

<sup>49</sup>A typical example of this critical attitude is Agazzi in his already quoted *Il giovane Croce e il marxismo*: 'La prospettiva aperta dal marxismo [a Croce] riusciva certamente affascinante: ma era un fascino che dava le vertigini perché al fondo di quella nuova strada si poteva intravedere la paventata riduzione relativistica dei valori, la loro risoluzione storicistica nella determinata condizionalità delle situazioni storico-sociali, ed in ultima analisi dei rapporti economici.' For Agazzi Croce's ultimate aim was essentially 'tentare una sorta di "restaurazione metafisica dei valori."' E. Agazzi, *Il giovane Croce e il marxismo*, p. 558. Also the Crocean Caserta from a different point of view comes to the same conclusion: 'In the intellectual biography of Croce Marxism ... does not mark a decisive turning point in the general orientation of his thought. It was a momentary political passion ... a vacillation.' E.G. Caserta, *Croce and Marxism* (Naples: Morano, 1987), p.9.

<sup>50</sup> B. Croce, 'Come nacque e come morì il marxismo teorico in Italia', in *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica* (Bari: Laterza, 1961), p.279.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.280. See also Croce, *Contributo*, p.33.

Engels. Although the Cassino intellectual is frequently mentioned in many Italian and European studies on Marxism, it is rare to come across scholars with direct knowledge of his writings. Yet, Labriola's influence on the understanding and spread of Marxism in Europe is extremely important.<sup>52</sup> Croce took personal charge of editing, financing and publishing his mentor's books.

When Labriola asked the young scholar to write a series of essays focussing on the importance of Marxism and its relevance for both social and political life, he accepted willingly, since he found the existing interpretation of the movement given by Italian academics such as Professor Achille Loria superficial and plagiaristic.<sup>53</sup> Thus, shortly afterwards Croce wrote in the French Socialist magazine *Le Devenir social* a strong critique of Loria's interpretation of historical materialism entitled *Les Théories historiques de M. Loria*.<sup>54</sup>

At that time many European intellectuals were engaged in applying historical materialism to their analyses of social and political life. However, the interpretations given by scholars like Lafargue, Bernstein, and, in Italy, Loria and Ferri had given a portrait of Marxism which seemed arbitrary to many progressive intellectuals.<sup>55</sup> Broadly speaking, the tendency was to reduce Marxism to a prescriptive set of economic rules to be applied according to an oversimplified model of society in which the economic factor was the determining element. Labriola and Croce reacted negatively to this 'reductionist' school of Marxism. They objected mostly to the simplistic way in which the economic struggles between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat were used as an explanatory category to analyze the social and political developments in capitalist society. Their aim was to produce a more rigorous literature on Socialism aimed at explaining plainly but without oversimplifications the main aspects of this doctrine.

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<sup>52</sup> Labriola's book *Del materialismo storico, dilucidazione preliminare* (Rome: Loescher 1896), was one of the most important points of reference on Marxism: 'Questo saggio fondò veramente l'autorità del Labriola come sistematore filosofico del materialismo storico ed ebbe divulgazione internazionale nella traduzione francese ... In questa forma lo leggeva, circa in quegli anni Leone Trotzky, durante il suo primo imprigionamento nel carcere di Odessa.' Croce, 'Il marxismo teorico in Italia', p.290. For a thorough account of Labriola's political relevance see the classic work by L. Dal Pane, *Antonio Labriola nella politica e nella cultura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975).

<sup>53</sup> Referring to Loria Croce wrote: 'In Italia ... il materialismo storico è diffuso quasi soltanto nella forma spuria datagli da un ingegnoso professore d'economia, il quale se n'è spacciato ritrovatore'. Croce, *Materialismo storico*, p.2.

<sup>54</sup> 'Les Théories historiques de M. Loria' in *Le Devenir Social*, ii, (1896), pp.881-905.

<sup>55</sup> For an account of Marxist revisionism see E. Santarelli, *La revisione del marxismo in Italia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1966) and G. Marramao, *Marxismo e revisionismo in Italia* (Bari: De Donato, 1971).

Years later, in 1928, Croce would remember the influence of Marxism in Italian cultural life in these terms:

Il socialismo marxistico veniva a riempire il vuoto che vaneggiava nel pensiero e negli ideali italiani ... ma sarebbe errato considerarlo semplicemente come siffatto riempitivo ... La ricezione del socialismo marxistico in Italia e il fermento a cui dié luogo, furono, per contrario, un complesso di correzioni, ... di migliori avviamenti, di maggiori approfondimenti, che ridié contenuto alla cultura italiana, la raccolse floscia e cascante e l'appoggiò a un'ossatura. Per opera del marxismo, nelle cose politiche fu cacciata al secondo piano la considerazione delle forme giuridiche degli istituti, sostituita dalle indagini sulla produzione e distribuzione economica, e sui bisogni che quelle forme esprimevano e tutelavano; non lasciandosi più sviare dal mero suono della parola "libertà", uso vocale del quale si era troppo abusato per trascorrere con quel motto sui problemi reali o per nascondergli agli occhi con un colpo di mano ... e tenendo sempre a guardare la realtà effettuale di là delle apparenze.<sup>56</sup>

This appraisal, which goes to the heart of the Marxist unmasking of the discourse of false bourgeois ideology, was hardly that of a flirtatious youth – he was by now sixty-two years of age. However, Croce and his mentor had very different ideas on Marxism from the very outset. Indeed, whereas Labriola was interested in spreading both the theoretical and the political influence of Socialism, Croce's interest was focused rather on finding a useful tool for historical inquiry.<sup>57</sup> Labriola's concern was to reform Italian Socialism, since he found that 'Il socialismo italiano' was 'fatto dagli *spostati*, dagli *avventurieri*, dagli *imbrogliani*, e dagli *snobisti*.'<sup>58</sup>

On the other hand Croce's interests were not political; in fact he did not have a specific political view at this point although he was sympathetic to some of the views of the Communist movement.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, Croce distinguished historical materialism as a tool of theoretical analysis from its encasement in the Socialist movement which embodied the political, therefore ideological side, of Marxism. Thus, Croce approached Marxism from an enquiring point of view, looking for a

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<sup>56</sup> B. Croce, *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915*, (Bari: Laterza, 1967), pp.142-43.

<sup>57</sup> 'Il lavoro scientifico prendeva solo una delle parti della vita del Labriola, che altrettanto e forse più ne dava alla politica e, ormai da alcuni anni al socialismo, e più da vicino, al socialismo italiano.' Croce, 'Il marxismo teorico in Italia', in *Materialismo storico*, p.292.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.297.

<sup>59</sup> 'La verità è che io era preso da una passione taciturna e tenace per la ricerca scientifica, indirizzata a risolvere alcuni problemi, che ... faticosamente venivo traendo fuori e schiarendo a me stesso ... Era

useful procedure rather than a political credo.<sup>60</sup> Marxism could provide some of the categories that the young scholar needed to solve issues on the interpretation of history he had encountered in his first papers, namely the unsolved problem of ‘interest’ that Croce was still developing, the other being the relation between the subjective character of historical narrative and the ‘forces’ which shape history.

In his early stage of Marxist reading, Croce did not believe that the doctrine was a new vision of the world or a new philosophy of history; on the contrary, the value of historical materialism lay for him in its defiance of any all-encompassing system of thought, and in its realism. As a matter of fact, from the very outset, Croce was less interested in interpreting Marx as such than in discovering what the German’s thought had to offer for his own project which he held remarkably firm. For when he later became convinced that Marxism embraced metaphysical elements he quickly discarded them.

This attitude is shown in the first article on Marxism by Croce, *Sulla concezione materialistica della storia*, which is dated 1896, later included in the volume *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica*.<sup>61</sup> The occasion of the article was a review of the already mentioned book by Labriola, *Del materialismo storico, dilucidazione preliminare*. In his analysis of the book, Croce wanted first to emphasize the function of historical materialism as an essential ‘empirical canon’ for historical inquiry, and then to present the core of Marxism as a ‘realistic’ critique of any arbitrary or metaphysical system of thought.<sup>62</sup> Croce considered Marx

Il socialista che intese come anche ciò che si chiama rivoluzione, per diventare cosa politica ed effettuale, debba fondarsi sulla *storia*,

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naturale che io non potessi sentire il socialismo e la politica in genere, al modo stesso in cui si sentiva un uomo di predominante passione e disposizione politica.’ *Ibid.*, p.301.

<sup>60</sup> On this subject it is interesting to read the first foreword to *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica* dated July 1899: ‘È stato affermato, da più d’uno, che io, da rigido marxista ortodosso, mi sia venuto via via mutando e abbia assunto in fine, atteggiamento di critico e di oppositore. Non avrei, naturalmente, nessuna difficoltà ad ammettere il fatto, se fosse vero. Ma che non sia vero non debbo spendervi parole intorno: i saggi qui raccolti, e che sono tutto ciò che ho mai pubblicato in materia, bastano a provarlo. Si vedrà che già in quello sul Campanella si criticavano le stravaganze filosofiche di uno dei più autorevoli marxisti ortodossi, del Lafargue; che nel secondo ... sono tutte le idee, riaffermate poi negli altri, sui limiti entro i quali il materialismo storico è da accogliere ... Dunque per quanto io cerchi od altri cerchi, non si riesce a determinare il tempo in cui sarei stato “marxista ortodosso”, e il momento in cui sarebbe avvenuta la mia conversione.’ *Ibid.*, p.viii.

<sup>61</sup> The first edition of *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica* was published in Palermo by Sandron in 1900.

<sup>62</sup> ‘La reazione filosofica dello spirito critico gettò a terra le costruzioni innalzate dalla teologia e dall’arbitrarismo metafisico, che adduggiavano il campo della storiografia. La vecchia filosofia della storia fu colpita a morte.’ Croce, *Materialismo storico*, p.2.

armandosi di *forza e potenza* (mentale, culturale, etica, economica), e non già confidare nei sermoni moralistici e nelle ideologie e ciarle illuministiche.<sup>63</sup>

The great merit of Marxism was its ability to unmask the real dynamics of power through criticizing the naïve views of the Enlightenment on the origin of laws and institutions. It showed once and for all that there is no such thing as ‘natural law’ but that legislation and institutions were connected with the interests of the emerging class (the bourgeoisie) who had specific aims and reasons for staying in power. What Marx had strongly criticized in thinkers such as Voltaire and Rousseau was their inclination to abstractness and their lack of historical perception. Statements such as ‘all men are equal’ or ‘everybody is equal before the law’ were promoted as deriving from ‘natural law’ and not products of a certain civilization expressed in a given period of time. The German philosopher had shown how these apparently impartial statements were ideologically driven. Later in his life Croce would recall:

Nella concezione politica ... il marxismo mi riportava alle migliori tradizioni della scienza politica italiana, mercè la ferma asserzione del principio della forza, della lotta, della potenza, e la satirica e caustica opposizione alle insipidezze giusnaturalistiche.<sup>64</sup>

It is clear that at this stage Croce did not see Marxism as a ‘grand discourse’. Instead, Marxist thought had a great appeal to Croce because he saw in it an insistence on ‘reality’ and a concrete approach to analyzing history without any grandiose scheme. Marxism had also strongly stated

la dipendenza di tutte le parti della vita tra di loro, e della genesi di esse dal sottosuolo economico, in modo che si può dire che di storie ce n’è una sola; il ritrovamento della forza reale dello Stato ... col considerarlo istituto di difesa della classe dominante; la stabilità dipendenza delle ideologie dagli interessi di classe; la coincidenza dei grandi periodi storici coi grandi periodi economici.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p.xiii.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.xii. See also Croce, *La storia d’Italia*, p. 145: ‘giovava che si lasciassero un po’ stare , insieme con la parola “libertà”, le altre di “umanità”, “fraternità”, “giustizia”, e simili ... Quelle parole erano state spostate dal loro luogo , fino a ipostatare ... una sorta di aeropago, collocato in un punto ideale, presieduto da un Dio o da una Dea, che avrebbe raddrizzato e risoluto ... le contese degli uomini ... quasi che le idee sussistano altrimenti che non come lavoro del pensiero e della volontà umana e si attuino altrimenti che con l’opera del braccio.’

All these elements (economy, state, ideology, hegemony) would enrich and help to refine the notion of history that Croce was beginning to develop. Thanks to Marx history was now seen in a new light: the economic, ideological, and political terrain were, for the young scholar, the real terrain of human activity. For Croce the German philosopher was the first to point out the fundamental value of history focusing on its immanence, since in Marx history did not deal with abstract structures:

La storia non è un processo dell'*Idea*, ossia di una trascendente realtà razionale, sibbene un sistema di forze: alla concezione trascendente si opporrebbe la concezione immanente.<sup>66</sup>

This injection of realism, with its firm rejection of idealism, crushed all metaphysical systems which had constrained historical research. It would be hard to find clearer repudiation of the Hegelianism with which Croce has repeatedly been associated.

Another element worth noticing is Croce's insistence on history as a 'system of forces'. The historical process is something complex that cannot be reduced to a single causative factor or a simple formula. If history includes a cluster of forces such as economy, society, ideology and state, we cannot look for a single original cause which is responsible for the whole historical process. Thus any historical perspective that reduces events to one source or causative principle inevitably produces a simplistic vision of history. This is the case of the theorists who want to establish laws of history embedded in such notions as 'Progress' or 'Evolution'. Progress does not explain history; it is just a contingent tool to be applied in certain cases in a given time to a specific society or state:

La stessa idea di *progresso*, che è parsa a molti la sola legge storica da salvare delle tante escogitate dai pensatori filosofi e non filosofi, è ... resa priva della dignità di legge e ridotta a significato assai particolare ... La storia ci insegna che gli uomini sono capaci di progredire; e noi possiamo guardare le svariate serie dei fatti sotto questo angolo visuale: non altro.<sup>67</sup>

To discard the idea of progress as the driving force in history implies an open interpretation of the sequence of events. Indeed, one of the consequences of *writing*

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<sup>65</sup> Croce, *Materialismo storico*, p.14.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.



history without the 'law of progress' is to prevent seeing the past merely as an impoverished prototype of the present. This perspective has important repercussions not only in the interpretation of history, but also in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and the like. Indeed, if progress is not the decisive factor we cannot automatically maintain, for instance, that the city-states in ancient Greece were less democratic than our democracy. Or that Australian aboriginal society is less developed than ours.

The same criticism can be applied to the concept of 'Evolution'. This pattern derived from the natural sciences cannot be transposed onto the historical field without distortion. Evolution in history presupposes a law of development towards the perfection, in some way or other, of human activity, namely the unfolding of a teleological law embodying itself in the world. Moreover, as in the case of progress, in an evolutionary pattern the past is somehow seen as inferior to the present. Such a view, although it might satisfy Spencer or the Hegelians, cannot be accepted as a general law of history, since it creates a deterministic conception in which our acting is controlled by 'Evolution'.

Finally, the last 'law' criticized by Croce is that of historical necessity:

Né meno circostanziale ed empirica è l'idea della *necessità storica*, dalla quale bisogna cancellare ogni traccia di razionalismo e di trascendenza, per vedervi il semplice riconoscimento del piccolissimo campo che nel corso delle cose è lasciato all'arbitrio individuale.<sup>68</sup>

Hence, 'necessity' in history is, for Croce, an empirical and limited notion. Any other attempt to extend this notion beyond this would produce a metaphysics relying on a 'fate' which drives human actions. Croce maintained that this is a transcendental conception not dissimilar to theological beliefs with their predetermined schemes. It is important to emphasize the fact that Croce did not deny the usefulness of the concepts of progress, evolution and necessity per se. What he rejected was an all-encompassing explanation of the world subsumed under one of these perspectives. The position of Croce is quite clear: it is impossible to give a definitive account of history. The reason for this is that any conception of what constitutes the real and definitive necessarily derives from an ideological position. Indeed, all our conjectures on reality are based on 'abstract laws' and we should not confuse our inferences with the real world:

Tutte le leggi scientifiche sono leggi astratte; e fra l'astratto e il concreto non c'è ponte di passaggio, appunto perchè l'astratto non è una realtà, ma uno schema di pensiero, un nostro modo di pensare, direi quasi, abbreviato. E se la conoscenza delle leggi rischiarà la nostra percezione del reale, essa non può diventare *questa percezione stessa*.<sup>69</sup>

There is no direct 'bridge' or infallible connection between our intellectual constructions and reality. This is the reason why all attempts to build an all encompassing philosophy of history, namely an intellectual structure which captures the whole of reality, is a desperate task:

La possibilità di una filosofia della storia presuppone la riduzione concettuale del corso della storia. Ora, se è possibile ridurre concettualmente i vari elementi della realtà che appaiono nella storia, ed è quindi possibile fare una filosofia della morale o del diritto, della scienza o dell'arte... non è possibile elaborare concettualmente il complesso individuato di questi elementi, ossia il *fatto concreto*, che è il corso storico.<sup>70</sup>

However, this interpretation of Marxism alarmed Labriola who believed that the real hub of historical materialism was to propose an alternative *Weltanschauung*. We have seen that the Cassino intellectual considered Marxism essentially a political doctrine in which praxis was fundamental and his main aim was to give Italian Socialism a sound theoretical basis, but as a movement. By contrast, Croce was interested in the theoretical model of Marxism, particularly in its critique to all-embracing systems. Moreover, for Labriola Marxism was a new philosophy of history, whereas Croce read it as the liquidation of all definitive systems:

Il materialismo storico ... non dev' essere né una nuova costruzione a priori di filosofia della storia, né un nuovo metodo del pensiero storico, ma semplicemente un *canone* d'interpretazione storica<sup>71</sup>.

The consequences of this approach to history are quite significant. Croce insisted on the anti-dogmatic, or anti-metaphysical attitude of historical inquiry.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp.101-102.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp.80-81.

Findings and discoveries in history are always provisional and open to change since historians do not elaborate laws in the manner of natural science but put forward ‘conjectures’:

Se poi dalle leggi astratte e dai concetti passiamo all’osservazione della realtà storica, noi troviamo, di certo, i punti di congiungimento dei nostri ideali con le cose; ma entriamo anche in quelle *previsioni e congetture*, nelle quali resta sempre non eliminabile ... *la varietà delle opinioni e delle tendenze*.<sup>72</sup>

Consequently historians should not have strong and definitive discourses to propound or, in other words, a dogmatic organizing framework for series of events. There is no ready-made plan into which one can slot events once and for all. The strength of historians lies instead in an open approach, in which ‘facts’ are continuously reassessed and corroborated.<sup>73</sup> In this case historical truth, as well as reality, is not an eternal and immutable absolute to be conquered once and for all, but rather a process of constant reappraisal of events, taking into account the various changes that occur. However, this open attitude, Croce maintained, should not be confused with ‘vulgar skepticism’:

Non già che si voglia raccomandare o in alcun modo giustificare il volgare scetticismo. Ma occorre nel tempo stesso essere consapevoli della *relatività* delle nostre credenze, e *praticamente risolversi quando il non risolversi è colpa*.<sup>74</sup>

Croce believed that history could never be a science in the strict sense because of its ‘variety of opinions and tendencies’. On the other hand, different historiographical views, far from diminishing the importance of the discipline, make it essential for an open conception of human knowledge.<sup>75</sup> However, although historical research accepts epistemological relativism as an integral part of its method, it does

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.102. Italics mine.

<sup>73</sup> ‘È appena necessario rammentare come si venga via via superando l’ingenua credenza comune dell’obiettività dello storico: quasi che le cose parlino e lo storico stia ad ascoltare e registrare le loro voci. Chi si mette a comporre storie ha innanzi documenti e racconti, ossia piccole parti e segni di ciò che è realmente accaduto; e per provarsi a ricostruire l’intero processo, gli è necessario ricorrere a una serie di presupposti, che sono le idee e le notizie che egli possiede delle cose della natura, dell’uomo, della società.’ Croce, Ibid., p.10.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.103. Italics mine.

<sup>75</sup> We will see later, analysing the *Logica*, that Croce maintained that history cannot be reduced to a science: it is rather the terrain in which all concepts develop.

not accept skepticism. The relativity of viewpoints does not imply the abandonment of historiography.

We can see that from the very outset Croce's was a *critique* of the existing systems rather than a new system of thought. The search for more effective tools for historical inquiry had led the young scholar to a dispassionate analysis of Marxism. The result was a deconstruction of historical materialism and its application as a valid instrument for historians, neither more nor less. Here lies another great divergence between Labriola and Croce on Marxism. Croce denied that historical materialism was a science. This was a logical consequence of his conception of Marxism as a '*somma di nuovi dati, di nuove esperienze, che entrano nella coscienza dello storico*'.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, whereas for Labriola Marxism represented a new economic science, for Croce it was a comparative sociological economics concerned with a problem of primary interest for historical and social life. Marx did not discover any 'law' with the theory of class struggle or the economic interpretation of history, but he taught us how to understand critically the effective reality of society. However, this did not diminish the importance of Marxism within historical and sociological studies:

Il Marx, come sociologo, non ci ha dato, di certo, definizioni sottilmente elaborate della 'socialità' come se ne possono trovare nei libri di qualche sociologo contemporaneo, dei tedeschi Simmel e Stammler o del francese Durkheim; ma egli insegna ... a penetrare in ciò che è la società nella sua realtà effettuale. Anzi, per questo rispetto, mi meraviglio come nessuno finora abbia pensato a chiamarlo, a titolo di onore, il 'Machiavelli del proletariato.'<sup>77</sup>

This last quotation is particularly interesting for several reasons. Firstly it shows the great relevance that Croce attributed to Marx calling him 'the Machiavelli of the proletariat'. The analogy between Machiavelli and Marx, far from being incidental, underlines the fundamental reasons for Croce's interest in the two thinkers. Croce saw in both Machiavelli and Marx the exponents of modern political theory with their attention to the real mechanisms of politics and society and their separation of ethics from politics.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, the passage also shows Croce's interest in sociology,

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<sup>76</sup> Croce, *Materialismo storico*, p.10.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113.

<sup>78</sup> Col marxismo ritornava in Italia quel Machiavelli, che si diceva dagli stranieri che gli italiani avessero sempre in mente, e che invece, gli italiani avevano abbandonato e dimenticato ... e in ultimo

that he was familiar with sociologists such as Durkheim (1858- 1919), and this casts a new light on his attitude towards sociology.<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, the tradition tends to portray Croce as a fierce anti-positivist from the very beginning of his philosophical career. We have already seen that in reality the philosopher's position towards science in general was much more sympathetic than is usually supposed. It is important to stress that Croce, despite his own later statements, did not have prejudicial ideas against sociology or science in general. On the contrary, we can see that the philosopher had a very positive view of Durkheim's and Simmel's social studies.

Croce would later attack sociology and its status as a science because of its pretensions to explain all social phenomena through 'social laws' similar to those of the natural sciences. When Durkheim stopped *describing* the reality of society and started to build a sociological system based on a 'philosophy of society' Croce became a harsh critic. The 'obsession' with positivism which would characterise *some* of his future writings was partly dictated by his rhetoric, and not his philosophy.<sup>80</sup> Positivism, in its negative aspects, meant for Croce a misuse of scientific methods in fields which could not be totally reduced to its laws: fields such as history, the arts, society and politics:

È senza dubbio cervelotico l'abborrimento che taluni professano per la scienza pura e per le astrazioni, giacché quei procedimenti intellettuali sono indispensabili alla conoscenza stessa della realtà concreta; ma non è meno cervelotica l'esclusiva stima delle proposizioni astratte, delle definizioni, dei teoremi, dei corollari: quasi che in ciò consista non si sa quale aristocrazia dello spirito umano.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, we need to put Croce's polemic against positivism into context,<sup>82</sup> bearing in mind that the actual *method* of Croce was to analyze problems in their particularity,

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era caduto nelle mani dei professori, che nell'espore il pensiero gli affliggevano prediche moralistiche.' Croce, *La storia d'Italia*, p. 145.

<sup>79</sup> Daniela Coli has challenged the idea of a Croce hostile to sociology maintaining that: 'Croce, mentre fu sempre polemico con la sociologia italiana e col suo maggiore rappresentante Vilfredo Pareto ... guardò sempre con interesse, da Simmel a Durkheim, a Weber, alla sociologia europea.' Croce, *Laterza e la cultura europea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1983), p. 82.

<sup>80</sup> For a thorough discussion on this topic see the collected essays contained in M. Losito, *Croce e la sociologia* (Naples: Morano, 1995). It includes contributions from academics such as Fulvio Tessitore, Giuseppe Cacciatore, Daniela Coli and Friedrich Tenbruck.

<sup>81</sup> Croce, *Materialismo storico*, p.112.

<sup>82</sup> It is worth reporting an extract from a letter of condolences sent by one of the major exponents of the Frankfurt school, the philosopher Marx Horkheimer (1895-1973) to Croce's wife: 'Benedetto Croce è

without sweeping judgements. Whenever Croce failed to do that he betrayed his own method.

We can see how Croce's early ideas on history, far from being rudimentary, as some critics have claimed,<sup>83</sup> had already questioned some crucial tenets of historiography, such as the notion of an unwavering, determined reality of the past, and all forms of perennial truth. Moreover, contrary to what has frequently been claimed, these very early ideas are strictly connected with the later developments of Croce's thought.

We have also seen how important Croce's reading of Marx was in shaping his historiography. Critics have frequently been led by their own assumptions about Marx as creating a metaphysics of dialectical materialism, or alternatively an economic determinism, to ignore Croce's explicit assertions about his own reading of the German thinker. There is a little doubt that what Croce found of value led him in a different direction, and helped him to root his historicism in the firm ground of social, political and material reality *without predetermined schemes*. It is not our task to discuss the authenticity of the variety of Marxisms, but simply to register Croce's own antimetaphysical reading of the great German, and demonstrate the mistaken nature of the 'early flirtation' thesis.

It should be clear by now that if we conceive the philosophical path of Croce as a struggle to achieve an idealist system we miss the kernel of his thought as well as its dramatic internal tensions. Conversely, one of the main features of Croce's thinking is the constant 'deconstruction' of systems in order to find their weak points and faults. The philosopher would go on use the same method with thinkers like Hegel, Vico, Machiavelli and others.

We can already notice that the essence of his particular philosophical inquiry lies in *analysis* rather than synthesis. As we shall see, even what is purported to be the most systematic work, the *Filosofia dello Spirito*, frequently elevated to gargantuan

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veramente insostituibile. Non è esagerato affermare che egli appartiene ai pochi che, dopo un'epoca in cui la filosofia ... ha minacciato di scomparire tra le scienze positive, ne hanno ristabilito la dignità ... Egli tuttavia non appartiene agli epigoni che intendevano ristabilire una metafisica ormai superata, ma ha recuperato la tradizione della filosofia speculativa a partire dall'esperienza concreta della sua propria situazione ... Ciò gli ha permesso una cosa che era preclusa proprio ai pensatori idealisti del tempo; di affrontare la problematica della società reale.' M. Horkheimer, 'Lettera di condoglianze di Max Horkheimer alla vedova Croce' in Losito, *Croce e la sociologia*, p.157.

<sup>83</sup> See for example David D. Roberts: 'Croce's earliest position included some rudimentary reactions and ideas – centred on political ideals, political realities, values, and history – that were not really satisfactory.' *Benedetto Croce*, p. 42.

proportions but in reality representing a tiny fraction of Croce's output, can be considered a series of enquiries in different fields, instead of a monument to idealism.

## 2.4 CROCE VERSUS GENTILE

By 1896 Croce was already well known among the learned in Italy and abroad. His writings on Marxism began to appear in some of the major socialist journals in France, Germany and Italy. By now he had restricted the field of his studies to history and literary criticism, having a considerable number of publications to his name.

The same year also marked the beginning of the intellectual exchange between Croce and Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944). The collaboration and then the dramatic break between the two philosophers characterized an entire era and it is not an exaggeration to maintain with Eugenio Garin that this relationship was one of the most important phenomena in the intellectual history of the first half of twentieth century Italy.<sup>84</sup> But to understand the complex cultural relationship between Croce and Gentile we must distinguish their different approaches to philosophy and method.

When Croce first came into contact with Gentile, the latter was an undergraduate at the prestigious Normale university in Pisa. The young Sicilian came from a middle class family of Castelvetrano (Trapani). His father was a chemist married to the daughter of a solicitor. The father fell into manic depression when Gentile was still studying in Pisa. Henceforth the young student had to face moments of great financial difficulty. Croce acted as patron-friend for several years during Gentile's academic career financing him whenever he needed help.<sup>85</sup> Gentile's professor and mentor Donato Jaia instilled in the young pupil a passion for the Hegelian philosophy of Bertrando Spaventa, the rigour of idealism and its obsession with 'pure thought'. From that point onwards Gentile's main philosophical concern was to build a system of thought in which theory and practice coincided.<sup>86</sup> The political consequences of this philosophical system would later have some unfortunate consequences.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> 'Il dialogo, poi il contrasto ... fra Croce e Gentile [è] forse il tema più significativo della nostra filosofia dell'ultimo cinquantennio.' Garin, *Cronache di filosofia italiana*, p.172.

<sup>85</sup> 'La cosa più alta di Gentile è stata, in gioventù, e per lunghi anni, la sua povertà. Croce, che lo sapeva, non gli regalava oggetti, ma gli dava cinquecento lire. Allora un professore ne guadagnava mille in un anno.' J. Jacobelli, *Croce Gentile. Dal sodalizio al dramma*, (Milan: Rizzoli, 1989), p. 16.

<sup>86</sup> 'Gentile sosteneva l'unità di teoria e prassi: non c'è un pensiero che riflette e un'azione che fa. Il pensiero è un fare, un'azione e l'azione un pensiero. Con questa formula Gentile stabilì un rapporto tra politica e storia che influenzò non solo l'area della destra ... ma anche le varie forme di rinnovamento del movimento socialista nel dopoguerra.' F. Papi, 'Lo storicismo italiano del novecento', in *Filosofia contemporanea*, vol.iii (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1992), p.304.

<sup>87</sup> For a thorough study of Gentile's life and thought see the rather sympathetic account by S. Romano, *Giovanni Gentile. La filosofia al potere* (Milan: Bompiani, 1990). The best English-language guide remains H. S.Harris, *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960).



Although it is commonplace to emphasize the collaborative nature of Croce and Gentile's early alliance, there were, in reality, major differences between the two from the very outset. In *Contributo alla critica di me stesso* Croce recalled:

Col Gentile, nel quale rinasceva la tradizione dello Spaventa ... s'iniziò una reciproca efficacia ... e una scambievole correzione *pur nelle vie alquanto diverse talvolta da ciascuno di noi seguite*.<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, Croce came from a solid historical and literary background, whereas Gentile had a strong idealistic orientation given by his 'purely' philosophical studies. However, Croce was attracted by the intellectual rigour of the young Sicilian scholar.<sup>89</sup> At the age of twenty-one Gentile had published many articles on important Italian thinkers such as Rosmini (1797-1895) and Gioberti (1801-1852) and his thesis, obtained in 1897, was considered an important piece of philosophical research.<sup>90</sup>

The first divergence between Croce and Gentile arose at the very beginning of their intellectual relationship, many years before 1913, the year in which the polemic became public. In fact it was by no means a slight disagreement. In October 1898 Croce wrote:

Io non so se posso dirmi d'accordo con voi nella veduta fondamentale intorno alla filosofia.<sup>91</sup>

This disagreement reflected not only the dissimilar backgrounds of the two philosophers, but, above all, their different frames of mind. Indeed, Gentile was from the start keen on a systematic, all-inclusive philosophy, which is ultimately the purpose of all idealistic perspectives, whereas Croce aimed essentially to explore the theoretical foundations of history and literature, but avoiding all grand discourses:

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<sup>88</sup> Croce, *Contributo*, p.55. Italics mine.

<sup>89</sup> 'Col Gentile, oltre alcune affinità pratiche, mi stringevano affinità di svolgimento mentale, e di cultura, perché anch'esso si era dapprima provato negli studi letterari ... e si era addestrato nelle indagini filologiche, e, come me, prendeva piacere in quel genere di lavoro ... che ogni studioso valido deve saper compiere da sé, pei propri bisogni e secondo i propri fini.' Ibid., p.36.

<sup>90</sup> Croce praised Gentile's thesis with these words: 'Una tesi di laurea che presenti simile maturità in ogni sua parte è cosa che capita di rado! La parte storica è eccellente: il metodo di critica è altamente scientifico; l'interpretazione psicologica delle due personalità è finissima.' B. Croce, *Lettere a Giovanni Gentile* (Milan: Mondadori, 1981), p.28.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

Confesso di essermi sempre occupato di problemi speciali ... A me è parso sempre ... che la *filosofia* non appartenga al novero delle scienze: che la massima parte di ciò che si chiamava filosofia debba essere assorbito in scienze speciali.<sup>92</sup>

Here Croce focused on philosophy as a *methodology* for the critique of science rather than a science itself:

Può esistere il *filosofare* per indicare un certo grado di elaborazione scientifica, ma non filosofia come scienza ... Se dunque la *filosofia* non è una *scienza* ... che cosa è? A me pare che la filosofia non possa *se non recarci alla coscienza* ciò che è il presupposto di ogni attività razionale dell'uomo, di ogni attività teoretica e pratica. Ciò la distingue dalla religione e dalla scienza.<sup>93</sup>

In this conception philosophy does not represent *the* true and ultimate view of the world, but rather a continuous clarification, or a critique, of the theoretical and practical foundations of human activities which follow *their own* methodologies.

A good example of this sharply contrasting view on philosophy between Croce and Gentile can be found in their discussion of the value of Marxism, as the Crocean Dario Faucci has pointed out.<sup>94</sup> We already know that Croce saw in Marxism a useful empirical canon to be used by historians in order to improve the current state of historiography. He had carefully avoided all the deterministic components of Marx, focusing instead on his potential for liberating history from dogma. Gentile, on the contrary, was attracted by what he called the 'scientific' side of historical materialism and its connections with Hegelianism. Indeed the Sicilian philosopher focused on the speculative part of Marx and investigated the links between the leader of historical materialism and Hegel. In his first book, *La filosofia di Marx*, published in 1899, he emphasized the *formal* coherence of this thought:

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<sup>92</sup> Croce, *Lettere a Giovanni Gentile*, p.28.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> 'Il principio intransigente monistico del Gentile entrava in funzione di contro alla distinzione già in atto nella prospettiva crociana. O tutto o nulla; o scienza o utopia era il socialismo ... Croce non si lasciò muovere da questo ragionamento più logicamente trionfante che pacatamente persuasivo. E così i punti fondamentali del dissidio teoretico tra Croce e Gentile eran già nettamente segnati.' D. Faucci, *La filosofia politica di Croce e Gentile*, (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1974), p.26.

*Formalisticamente* considerata, la concezione materialistica della storia ha tal carattere filosofico ... che non soffre critica alcuna d'inconsequenza.<sup>95</sup>

The rigorous analysis carried out by Gentile attracted the attention of Croce although the latter did not agree with the conclusions. In a letter to Gentile dated July 1899 the Neapolitan philosopher reported:

Mi pare che abbiate dato un' eccellente trattazione della metafisica trattata dal Marx ... quanto alla interpretazione *restrittiva ed empirica*, che io do della dottrina di Marx, e che voi non accettate, si potrebbero dire parecchie cose per difenderla. Tra le altre questa: che giacchè il Marx non ha insistito sulla sua metafisica ed ha insistito moltissimo sulle posizioni sociologiche, storiche, economiche, è giusto interpretare queste indipendentemente, come osservazioni di fatto.<sup>96</sup>

We know that the metaphysical part of Marxism was marginal for Croce. To focus on the philosophical coherence of Marxism was to accept that the doctrine was another kind of philosophy of history. The original aspect of historical materialism, Croce wrote to Gentile, was its realistic critique of modern society:

Come già vi accennai credo che l'interpretare il Marx dichiarando *secondarie* le sue vedute metafisiche, non possa dirsi un procedimento comodo ma ingiustificato, giacché è per lo meno tanto giustificato quanto l'inverso, e forse più. Appercepirlo come *critico* della società presente e come *storico* di essa, e come *politico* del movimento proletario, è prender Marx in ciò che forma la parte veramente notevole della sua attività.<sup>97</sup>

This interpretation of Marxism, focused on the analysis of social structures, institutions, and culture, would exert a major influence on thinkers such as Gramsci and contribute to a more flexible conception of notions like 'revolution', or 'society without classes', which were also susceptible to dogmatic readings of historical materialism as a 'grand scheme' destined to determine the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, Gentile did not accept Croce's position. In his opinion Marx's aim was to build a powerful system in which ideas and actions, or theory and practice, were integrated. His intentions were not dissimilar to those of Hegel in his ambition to

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<sup>95</sup> G.Gentile, *La filosofia di Marx. Studi critici*, in *Opere complete di Giovanni Gentile*, vol. xxviii (Florence: Sansoni, 1955), p. 53.

<sup>96</sup> Croce, *Lettere a Giovanni Gentile*, pp. 55-56.

embrace all aspects of reality. Indeed, for the Sicilian philosopher, Marx was not in opposition to Hegel and his philosophy was more than a method, it was a philosophy of history:

Ciò che vi è di essenziale nel fatto storico è per Hegel l'idea che si sviluppa dialetticamente; per Marx la materia (il fatto economico) che si sviluppa ugualmente; e se Hegel con la sua idea poteva fare una filosofia della storia, ha pure da poterla fare Marx.<sup>98</sup>

By now, Gentile had completely assimilated Marxism to Hegelianism stressing the similarities between historical materialism and idealism. Within this perspective Marx's thought became a continuation of Hegel's:

L'idea, lungi dall'essere opposta alla realtà è per Hegel l'essenza del reale ... e la materia del materialismo storico lungi dall'essere esterna ed opposta all'idea di Hegel, vi è dentro compresa, anzi, è una cosa medesima con essa, poiché ... lo stesso relativo ... non solo non è fuori dall'assoluto, ma è identico ad esso.<sup>99</sup>

Gentile then proceeded to show the *likeness* between Hegel and Marx:

L'oggetto equivale al non essere hegeliano, la cui contraddizione intrinseca all'essere produce il divenire dell'essere stesso ... sicché anche per questa via la correzione del materialismo consiste in un' applicazione alla materia di ciò che Hegel aveva esattamente scoperto per rispetto allo spirito.<sup>100</sup>

This logical but extremely schematic reduction of Marxism to Hegelianism was a typical example of Gentile's philosophical method: a few concepts taken to their extreme consequences in order to fit an abstract system.<sup>101</sup> The complexity of Marxism could now be pigeonholed within the grandiose Hegelian framework:

Il soggetto, l'attività pratica di Marx è la tesi; le circostanze, la educazione sono l'antitesi, il soggetto modificato dalle circostanze, la sintesi.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p.57.

<sup>98</sup> Gentile, *La filosofia di Marx*, p.42.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p.55.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p.86.

<sup>101</sup> Bedeschi has noted that, 'in realtà Marx era, secondo Gentile, un "idealista nato", il quale, nel periodo formativo della sua mente, aveva avuto tanta familiarità con la filosofia di Fichte prima, e di Hegel poi.' G. Bedeschi, *La fabbrica delle ideologie* (Bari: Laterza, 2002), p.282.

<sup>102</sup> Gentile, *La filosofia di Marx*, p.85.

Gentile's argument, far from being banal, picked up on one of the crucial issues of Marxism, namely its relation between theory and practice, thought and action. Gentile solved the problem by equating the two terms. Strictly speaking, Gentile argued, thought *is* action, and this is the core of historical materialism, not dissimilar to Hegelianism in which the subject *makes* the object. The equation thought-action was a sort of anticipation of Gentile's 'idealismo attuale' in which the whole of reality is reduced to an abstract unity.

We can now see how their evaluations of historical materialism reflect the radically different perspectives of Croce and Gentile. The former did not have a metaphysical system to defend. Indeed, we have seen that Croce's aim was the exact opposite, a liberation of history from any deterministic plan which would encase it in a ready-made metaphysics. Gentile, instead, started from the very opposite position: from his idealistic perspective, thought makes the world, things are made by our intellect; without thoughts not only can we not talk about things, but things *do not exist*.

Another point worth noticing in Gentile's reading of Marxism is the stress the young thinker put on the relation between the individual and society. The individual, in this perspective, only exists as a function of society as a whole:

L'individuo concreto sociale, tutt'uno con la società di Marx è pratico.<sup>103</sup>

This conception would be at the centre of Gentile's notion of the 'stato etico' in which the individual exists subordinate to the State. When Fascism came to power the Sicilian philosopher had simply to apply his theory in order to justify, both morally and politically, the dictatorship. If the individual is subsumed within the social, his personal ethics coincide with those of the State and there is no space, or indeed need, for liberty since the freedom of the individual is embodied in the 'freedom' of the State.

One can see that the divergence between Croce and Gentile was present from the outset, although the Neapolitan philosopher had practical reasons for not stressing their differences. Croce saw in Gentile the qualities of a remarkably serious researcher with a profound sense of history, as his numerous publications show, and he admired

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p.91.

these features of the scholar's work.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, he made no secret of the important insights that Gentile had given him. If one examines his correspondence with Gentile, one can see how open Croce was. For instance, in 1902, after the publication of his *Estetica*, which immediately raised him to the status of one of the most important contemporary philosophers, he wrote to his friend:

Mio caro Gentile, io vi ringrazio di tutto cuore di avermi straordinariamente giovato ... con la vostra conversazione epistolare ed orale ... e spero di non fossilizzarmi così presto da non aver da aggiungere, svolgere e correggere nulla di quanto ho pensato e ho scritto.<sup>105</sup>

Although both Croce and Gentile were aware of the deep differences between their approaches to philosophy, the former tended to gloss over the differences in order to keep the discussion and the friendship alive.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, when Croce started *La Critica*, there was a common terrain on which they could work, namely coming to terms with the past fifty years of Italian culture, an ambitious plan that the Neapolitan philosopher carried out for more than forty years. We will see later in this chapter that the programme Croce set for his journal was broad enough to host the different philosophical positions of both thinkers, focusing on concrete research rather than on their different perspectives. However, differences of views were always present, as the following 'diplomatic' letter, sent by Croce in December 1906, reveals:

Per conservare l'unità alla rivista è bene che le questioni in cui tra noi c'è dissenso siano possibilmente *accantonate* per essere risolte prima fra noi.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Among Gentile's main works we can mention: *Storia della filosofia italiana dal Genovesi al Galuppi* (1903), *I problemi della scolastica e il pensiero italiano* (1913), *Studi vichiani* (1915), *Il pensiero italiano del Rinascimento* (1920), *I profeti del risorgimento italiano* (1923). Moreover, he was an indefatigable editor and translator of many classics of philosophy, such as the works of Spinoza, Bruno and Kant. Many of these studies first appeared in *La Critica*.

<sup>105</sup> Croce, *Lettere a Gentile*, p.124.

<sup>106</sup> In a letter addressed to an anonymous friend in July the 30<sup>th</sup> of 1925 Croce wrote: 'Il Gentile era *purus philosophus*, io sentivo che la filosofia doveva sorgere e trasfondersi insieme negli studi particolari, specialmente negli studi storici. Inoltre, fin d'allora, io notavo in lui quel che poi ho chiamato atteggiamento teologico, a me poco confacente ... D'altra parte a me giovava di aver vicino e discutitore uno studioso di indirizzo mentale alquanto diverso, e, in un certo senso, opposto, perché ne traevo stimolo al mio personale pensiero.' B. Croce, *Epistolario* (Naples: Istituto italiano per gli studi storici, 1967), p. 119.

<sup>107</sup> Croce, *Lettere a Gentile*, p.220.

Another great point of divergence came with the interpretation of Hegel's philosophy. Gentile stressed the metaphysical side of the German philosopher insisting on the ontological identity between reality and idea. He tended to accept Hegel's thought as the ultimate reflection on philosophy. Croce, instead, had a more critical approach as a letter dated January 1907 shows:

Hegel bisogna *digerirlo*, e non tenerlo sullo stomaco, come lo teneva ancora lo Spaventa. Se il mio digestivo non vi sembra efficace, bisogna prepararne un altro ... Può darsi che la via da me scelta non sia giusta, ma una via bisogna trovarla per mostrare che i concetti dell'arte, della storia e della filosofia della natura, così come li pone Hegel non reggono.<sup>108</sup>

But the great discrepancy between the two thinkers fully emerged when, in 1911, Gentile, now one of the most important academics in Italy, delivered at the University of Palermo a lecture entitled 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro'<sup>109</sup> which was an elucidation, in polemic with Croce, of his 'actual idealism'.

Gentile, by now, had already gathered around himself an enormous following of young Italian students, attracted by the mix of rhetoric and 'activism' typical of his philosophy, who gravitated around the Biblioteca filosofica di Palermo.<sup>110</sup> Henceforth the already precarious 'alliance' between the two thinkers began to deteriorate and Croce came out publicly with an article entitled *Intorno all'idealismo attuale*, published in 1913 in *La Voce* addressed to Gentile and his school:

Miei cari amici della *Biblioteca filosofica di Palermo* ... il vostro *idealismo attuale* non mi persuade. E debbo dirvelo in pubblico, perché non mi piacerebbe di continuare a dirlo solo tra me e me, o in conversazioni private.<sup>111</sup>

By now, Croce felt that the theoretical differences between his conception of philosophy and Gentile's were incompatible and could have grave practical

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<sup>108</sup>Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>109</sup>In *Annuario della Biblioteca filosofica*, I (Palermo: 1912-14), pp. 27-42.

<sup>110</sup>It is interesting to report Bobbio's experience as a young student: 'All'inizio dei miei studi, durante la composizione della tesi di laurea ... ero più gentiliano che crociano.... Solo in seguito, allargando l'orizzonte dei miei studi ... non tardai a convincermi che la filosofia dell'atto puro era un abile ma capzioso e sterile gioco verbale.' Preface to Jacobelli, *Croce Gentile*, p. vii.

<sup>111</sup>B. Croce, *Conversazioni critiche* (Bari: Laterza, 1918), p.67. In Gentile 'la difesa degli allievi è un tema ricorrente ... con Croce tutte le volte che i toni tornano ad essere polemici, anche perché Croce

repercussions; thus, he decided to make his critique of 'actual idealism' public. The article was a thorough analysis of a form of thought dominated, Croce argued, by the obsession for *unity* which was the hub of Gentile's system. In Croce's view,

L' *unità* ... è solo un momento della filosofia; e l'altro momento è la *particolarità* ... Confesso che ciò che sempre mi ha suscitato interesse è il *momento della particolarità* ... E dove lavorando a ben chiarire ed approfondire la particolarità, mi sono trovato, infine, a chiarire, per quel che a me occorreva, l'unità stessa.<sup>112</sup>

Croce argued that this purely theoretical unity, in its artificial use of an abstract logic, ultimately represented a form of mysticism in which any opposition or distinction would be cancelled:

Il vostro idealismo attuale ... mi sembra una filosofia ... la quale si propone di far tacere una volta per sempre le dispute filosofiche ... con l'idealismo attuale il genere umano riceverebbe insomma una *rivelazione* attesa per secoli invano.<sup>113</sup>

In Croce's view this pompous metaphysics was a pointless attempt to subsume once and for all the 'mystery' of Reality:

Io la penso diversamente ... e sento la filosofia come affatto coincidente con la vita ... e ripugno qualsiasi dottrina che , una volta per sempre mi sciolga l'*enigma* della realtà.<sup>114</sup>

Furthermore, Croce saw from the very beginning the dangerous *political* consequences of Gentile's perspective. Indeed, what was ethically characteristic of this philosophical mysticism was an absence of indignation or protest combined with a passive acceptance of Reality, believing that good and evil are part of one and the same process:

Ciò che soprattutto mi impensierisce ... è la depressione che produce nella coscienza dei contrasti della realtà, l'acquiescenza al fatto come

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odiava le scuole ... e non risparmiava loro attacchi feroci.' M. Visentin, 'Croce e Gentile. La fine del sodalizio', *Cultura*, 2 (1993), pp. 311-21 (p.320).

<sup>112</sup> Croce, *Conversazioni*, p.72.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.72-73.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p.73.



fatto, all'atto come atto ... Io temo che voi, miei cari amici, torniate all'indifferentismo teoretico ed etico.<sup>115</sup>

This article, written twelve years before Gentile's enthusiastic adherence to Fascism, foresaw remarkably well the *practical* consequences of 'actual idealism'. Indeed, Croce had read the potential 'applications' of that philosophical theory and was worried about the outcome.<sup>116</sup> The separation between theory and practice that Croce had always maintained and Gentile considered a lack of philosophical rigour<sup>117</sup> turned out to be a necessary distinction with important political repercussions.

A number of other articles reveal the tension between the two philosopher friends well before the fated break in 1925, the year of the Fascist intellectuals' manifesto written by Gentile and the reply to it, penned by Croce. In January 1923, for instance, the Neapolitan philosopher had written:

Paglia e foglie secche mi sembrano le più delle disquisizioni odierne sull'atto puro, sulle forme dello spirito, sull'unità e la distinzione, sull'immanenza e la trascendenza, sull'idealismo e il naturalismo, e via dicendo. Nè ciò, semplicemente per colpa degli individui, per loro poca ingegnosità; ma appunto perchè quando una crisi spirituale ha avuto il suo svolgimento e ne è stato raccolto il frutto, è impossibile continuarla ... Non si riesce ad altro, in questo caso, che a ripetere, combinare, sottilizzare, fraintendere ed esagerare il già trovato. I nuovi tempi richiedono altro.<sup>118</sup>

Croce opposed to a 'mystical' vision of philosophy a thinking which was mainly an applied *critique* rather than a series of metaphysical constructions:

Ed ecco perchè io non mi stanco di inculcare, con le parole e con l'esempio, ai giovani studiosi italiani di volgersi agli studi della critica della storia, e a tutte le altre forme di operosità mentale e pratica, e

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p.75 and 82.

<sup>116</sup> In his recent book on Gentile, Gennaro Sasso does not accept the connection between Gentile's political position and his philosophy. In other words, for Sasso, Gentile's adherence to Fascism was not a direct consequence of his philosophical view but a sort of ideological posturing. See G. Sasso, *Le due Italie di Giovanni Gentile* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), pp. 568-69. It is difficult to accept this argument since in Gentile life and thought were one thing. Indeed, he remained faithful to the Fascist ideal until his death in 1944, when he was killed by a partisan. For a thorough analysis of Sasso's book see David. D. Roberts, 'Maggi's Croce, Sasso's Gentile and the riddles of twentieth-century Italian intellectual history', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 1(2002), pp.125-39.

<sup>117</sup> See, for instance Gentile's article, 'La distinzione crociana di pensiero e azione', *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, xix (1941), pp. 274-78.

<sup>118</sup> Croce, 'Troppa filosofia', pp. 62-63.

*raffrenare la spinta istintiva all'astratto filosofare, che facilmente si disperde nel nulla.*<sup>119</sup>

Croce was witnessing the mental dissipation of young intellectuals mesmerized by the hypnotic personality of Gentile. Many of these young students would find in Fascism a justification for their over-simplified philosophical scheme. But Croce warned:

Il filosofare precedente ... nacque da condizioni di fatto determinate e non da escogitazioni monastiche, e volle servire al giudizio, e non foggiare schemi e idoli logici.<sup>120</sup>

We will see later in this work that Croce, by now, had rejected all labels for his philosophy, after realizing the ambiguities of the word 'idealism'. The clash with Gentile had clarified in his mind the true aim of philosophy which, in his opinion, should not be confused with 'academic philosophy':

Bisogna cangiare la tradizionale figura del filosofo che sia solo e puro filosofo, e ridurla a quella del critico, dello storico e dello scienziato e, insomma dell'uomo ... che alla filosofia si volge solo per necessità intrinseca al suo proprio processo mentale e pratico.<sup>121</sup>

Moreover, against Gentile's position which was becoming increasingly politicized, Croce posed his original *distinction* between theory and practice, philosophy and politics:

So bene che, a udir rammentare questa linea di distinzione tra teoria e pratica, tra filosofia e politica ... si suol rispondere con l'obiezione ... che a questo modo si scinde pensiero e azione e si nega l'efficacia pratica delle dottrine. Al che sarebbe da ribattere che, non facendo a questo modo, si negano verità e azione insieme, e si ricade in un oscuro determinismo.<sup>122</sup>

In Gentile's view, as we have already seen, thought and action were directly connected and identical. To Croce, this was pure sophistry and he saw the absurdity of this position and its disastrous consequences for individual choice:

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p.63. Italics mine.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> B. Croce, 'Contro la troppa filosofia politica', *La Critica*, ii (1923), pp.126-28 (p. 127).

Ciò che ... nessuna filosofia o teoria può dare, è la formola che permetta di sapere con sicurezza quello che caso per caso sia da operare, e risparmi la fatica e la responsabilità della risoluzione individuale ... L'azione pratica non si deduce da alcuna teoria ... e non si riduce a termini intellettuali, e si giustifica solo in se stessa ... nella voce della coscienza.<sup>123</sup>

These words are not only a clear indication of the unbridgeable gap between the two thinkers, but also reveal once again how Croce's thought, far from being dogmatic, as frequently presented by a crystallized critical tradition, was, instead, remarkably flexible. The cultural status he had enjoyed for many years did not prevent him from being critical towards all institutionalized cultural organizations which had a dogmatic position to defend. Indeed, Croce was against what he called 'lo spirito professorale' which

promuove le inconcludenti dissertazioni, con annessa rassegna dei *dogmata* ... che non trovano altri lettori che i loro autori e i concorrenti accademici di essi, e non mai rischiarano alcun intelletto ... Al tempo stesso lo spirito professorale promuove per l'appunto la ripetizione, l'imitazione, la contraffazione, la falsificazione delle filosofie, foggiando la 'scuola', e compiacendosi del fiorire della 'scuola', cioè non solo dell'aver attorno qualche imbecille, ma dell'averne molti.<sup>124</sup>

The main target of the many tirades written by the Neapolitan philosopher against academia were the 'gentiliani', of course, but also the Catholics who were becoming increasingly influential within the main Italian universities. Croce, who chose to be an outsider from the very beginning of his career, did not like the idea of having a school of 'crociani':

Considero ... nell'ordine regolare delle cose che nello stesso idealismo, succeduto al positivismo, si ripresentino ... la scuola, la setta e la chiesuola: il che lo avevo preveduto e annunciato molti anni prima ... e presi d'impegno di oppormi con tutte le mie forze come ora vado facendo.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> B. Croce, 'Filosofia e accademismo', *La Critica*, v (1924), pp.317-20 (p. 319).

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p.320.

The definitive break between Croce and Gentile coincided with the publication of the *Manifesto degli intellettuali antifascisti*, published at the request of the liberal Giovanni Amendola on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April 1925. After a period of uncertainty towards Fascism, Croce went into opposition and wrote the manifesto which was a direct response to the Fascist programme written by Gentile. In a few lines Croce defined how the regime appeared to a 'spregiudicato osservatore':

un incoerente e bizzarro miscuglio di appelli all'autorità e di demagogismo, di professata riverenza alle leggi e di violazione delle leggi, di concetti ultramoderni e di vecchiumi muffiti, di atteggiamenti assolutistici e di tendenze bolsceviche, di miscredenza e di corteggiamento alla Chiesa cattolica, di aborrimiento dalla cultura e di conati sterili verso una cultura priva delle sue premesse, di sdilinquimenti mistici e di cinismo.<sup>126</sup>

The rupture with Gentile was inevitable when Croce fully understood the political implications of the latter's thought, and even the long-term friendship came to an end. Gentile's thought had by now succeeded in becoming the 'established' philosophy, and his *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, started in 1920, was one of the most prominent academic journals.

In an article published in 1930 Croce analyzed with lucidity the reasons for the popularity of Gentile's philosophy, focusing on the needs, or 'bisogni', that the doctrine of actual idealism tried to meet:

L'idealismo attuale offriva ... l'attrattiva del sublime e del facile insieme, perchè la dottrina, in questa parte, assai permetteva e prometteva. Non solo infatti liberava dal naturalismo e dal positivismo, ma da tutte le filosofie precedenti ... tutte, a sua sentenza, peccanti di falsa posizione, cioè di naturalismo, per non aver compreso che il reale non è se non l'attualità del pensiero che pensa.<sup>127</sup>

The main defect of Gentile's philosophy was for Croce its tendency to create a definitive system, whether it was about the ultimate form of state, or the ultimate philosophy. Instead of using idealism as a *tool* to interpret the preceding tradition in a more rigorous and less schematic way, this form of idealism had taken the tool for the whole of reality, dividing history into precursors of idealism on the one hand, and

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<sup>126</sup> B. Croce, *Filosofia – Poesia – Storia* (Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi, 1951), p. 1058.

<sup>127</sup> B. Croce, 'Osservando il corso delle cose', *La Critica*, v (1930), pp. 317-20 (p.317).

‘naturalists’ on the other, who had misinterpreted or failed to understand that reality consisted in the ‘pure act’. This one-dimensional view of philosophy and culture gave people the impression of embracing the whole complexity of the world within a few well-polished formulas:

Dinnanzi a qualsiasi più particolare o più complesso problema, la soluzione propugnata era il riportamento all’attualità del pensiero.<sup>128</sup>

The simplistic approach of ‘idealismo attuale’ to complex issues had also been the key for penetrating Italian academia:

Quella dottrina, formatasi nel seno dell’università italiana, si univa, in quanto filosofia universitaria, alle speranze della filosofia accademica, alla fortuna che le sarebbe toccata quando i suoi rappresentanti avessero potuto acquistar forza e predominio nella vita accademica.<sup>129</sup>

In reality a deeper analysis of ‘actual idealism’ revealed a half-baked mix of rhetoric, nationalism, and pseudo-Hegelian logic which was, for Croce, a sort of parody of German idealism:

Esso era ... la forma più semplicistica dell’idealismo filosofico; e gli Hegel e gli altri vecchi idealisti l’avrebbero considerata non il perfezionamento ma la caricatura del loro pensiero.<sup>130</sup>

Moreover, the mystical tone of Gentile’s philosophy, despite its proclaimed anticlericalism, seemed to appeal to some parts of the Catholic church:

L’ ‘idealismo attuale’ aveva, tra l’altro, un certo tono teologico, come di affermazione del vero Dio, e praticamente si atteggiava verso il cattolicesimo come chi dicesse: ‘possiamo in qualche modo intenderci e dividerci il dominio: a voi le masse, coloro che hanno bisogno di Dio sul Sinai; a noi gli eletti che lo ritrovano, atto puro, nell’attualità del proprio pensiero.’<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p.318.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p.320. Giuseppe Prezzolini wrote in 1923: ‘Tutti sentono in Gentile uno spirito religioso. Nel suo scrivere sembra negare il suo pensiero; questo è di una dittatura idealistica e raziocinativa che spaventa, ma quello sembra avere invece un ritmo rispondente ad un segreto, più intimo bisogno di spirito, il bisogno religioso.’ *La coltura italiana* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1923), p.88.

Croce's analysis of 'actual idealism' is essential in order to understand his conception of philosophy and culture in general. The purpose of all intellectual enquiries is for Croce a better understanding of the world in which we live. The conflict-collaboration with Gentile helped Croce to distance his position from an extreme form of idealism and keep firm the distinction between theory and practice, thought and action. For Croce, the world in its multifaceted aspects cannot be reduced to thought, although thought is the only instrument we have to comprehend it. For Gentile idealism was a profession of faith, the ultimate truth of philosophy, the resolution of ideas and reality into a single system. However, the greater level of 'reality' that Gentile was seeking clashed dramatically with the antimetaphysical attitude of Croce's thought. Croce approached idealism with a very pragmatic aim, a powerful tool to employ in his researches in history and literature.

## 2.5 THE PROGRAMME OF *LA CRITICA*

The received critical tradition has emphasized the ‘idealistic core’ of Croce’s thought seeing this as the source of his philosophy. As we have already demonstrated, he simply intended to utilize idealism to develop a method through which one could better explore reality in its concreteness. In the next chapter it will be shown how Croce made use of *certain elements* of idealism in order to clarify his philosophical view. In this context he would find history to be the informing principle of all his research, since this discipline represented for Croce the privileged terrain on which philosophical inquiry develops.

By keeping in mind Croce’s aim, which was not to construct an idealistic system which would encapsulate the whole of knowledge, but produce better analytical tools for elaborating discourses in specific disciplines such as history and literature, we will be able to appreciate better the importance of his specific critiques in the humanities. An important instrument in this respect was *La Critica*, the pioneering bimonthly started by the philosopher at the turn of the twentieth century. *La Critica* would become one of the most significant cultural journals of the first fifty years of 20th century Italy. Divided into two series (1903-1914 and 1915-1944), and centred on the personality of its editor, the periodical contributed to ‘liberare la cultura italiana dal suo mediocre provincialismo’.<sup>132</sup> The great success of the journal has to be ascribed to its formula. *La Critica* broadened the horizons of Italians beyond the narrow and stuffy confines of specialist academic frameworks. Indeed, Croce avoided ‘professorial jargon’, insisting on an effective and straightforward discourse:

Nella forma letteraria del filosofare mi ero industriato di adoperare meno che potessi vocaboli e parole di scuola, che danno nel gergo, persuaso che molta buona filosofia si può fare con le parole di ordinaria conversazione.<sup>133</sup>

Croce’s intellectual development had taken place mostly outside the academic environment and we have already seen how defiant he was of official educational

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<sup>132</sup> Garin, *Cronache di filosofia italiana*, p.276.

<sup>133</sup> B. Croce, ‘Osservazioni su libri nuovi’, in *Terze pagine sparse*, vol. II (Bari: Laterza, 1955), p. 85. The originality of Croce’s prose has been recently recognized by Emma Giammattei who maintains that ‘quella novità di scrittura ... lo fece subito diverso e separato rispetto ai filosofi maneggianti i linguaggi specialistici, allo stesso modo in cui l’armatura concettuale lo aveva già reso sospetto alla dottrina spicciola dei letterati di professione.’ *Retorica e idealismo. Croce nel primo Novecento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987), p.5.

institutions. The intrinsic intellectual conservatism of universities and schools ran counter to Croce's *critical* conception of philosophy: the fierce attacks on the 'professors' should be read in this context.<sup>134</sup> His polemic was, above all, directed at a certain way of conceiving culture, particularly philosophy, history and literature as detached from reality:

Serbato insieme il sentimento della vita reale, e della letteratura e della scienza come nascenti da essa ... indirizzavo le mie censure e le mie polemiche per una parte contro i dilettanti e i lavoratori antimetodici, e per l'altra contro gli accademici adagiati in pregiudizi.<sup>135</sup>

From within such horizons the programme of *La Critica* was drafted in November 1902 and published with the first issue in January of the following year:

Abbiamo in Italia molte riviste speciali, di storia politica, di filologia, di filosofia, di arte, e, specie, di storia letteraria, talune delle quali sotto ogni aspetto ottime. Ma, dovendo ciascuna d'esse tener dietro alla copiosa produzione di un singolo ramo di studii, ed informare i lettori su tutte le questioni e controversie minute, è naturale che non possano soddisfare al bisogno di chi desidera un ragguaglio critico e, come una scelta, dei libri d'interesse generale.<sup>136</sup>

The purpose of the journal, Croce reported, was to provide a critical examination of modern Italian history and literature,<sup>137</sup> with an eye on other European cultural traditions, particularly the French and the German.

Croce advocated a 'svecchiamento', or renewal, of Italian culture which was not conceived as a *rejection* of the preceding tradition, but rather a reinterpretation of it from a different perspective. For Croce we need to 'make peace' with our past in order to fully understand the present and prepare the future. Thus, the departure from the past had to be accompanied by a critical assimilation of it through 'un ponderato

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<sup>134</sup> 'Questo tono disdegnoso verso la filosofia dei "professori", che è costante nell'opera del Croce, ... non fu cosa accidentale o riducibile al consueto moto polemico di un pensiero ribelle ed originale che rompe in guerra contro cristallizzazioni ormai scolasticizzate. Lungi dall'esaurirsi in stroncature singole, è il tema che esprime la direzione di tutto un modo di filosofare: è il rifiuto battagliero della filosofia come "metafisica" evidente o larvata, in nome di una "critica" come consapevolezza metodica' Garin, *Cronache*, pp.175-76.

<sup>135</sup> Croce, *Contributo*, p.42.

<sup>136</sup> B. Croce, 'Introduzione' in *La Critica* i (1903), pp.1-5, (p. 1).

<sup>137</sup> 'L'Italia, ha in questo mezzo secolo, lavorato assai, anche nel campo intellettuale; e dell'opera compiuta, e dei meriti e delle deficienze di questa non si ha ancora una cognizione precisa ed equilibrata, oscillandosi tra giudizi vaghi ed improvvisati, ottimistici o pessimistici, con prevalenza degli ultimi.' *Ibid.*, p. 4.





ritorno a tradizioni di pensiero ... nelle quali rifulgeva l'idea della sintesi spirituale, l'idea dell'*humanitas*.'<sup>138</sup> The idea of *humanitas* is crucial in Croce's thought, since it represents the possibility of grounding history, literature and science in the figure of the transcendently *free* and *creative* individual. Edmund Jacobitti in his *Revolutionary Humanism and Historicism in modern Italy* (1981) has provided a useful comment on this notion:

The foundation of humanist historicism is the belief that a true understanding of man can come only from an objective assessment of man as he is, not as he ought to be, man as he is revealed in the historical record rather than man as revealed in the visions of theologians and philosophers.<sup>139</sup>

Indeed, Croce's antimetaphysical method aimed essentially at a liberation from all types of transcendence in order to construct a *fully human* history. The issue here was the status of humanity as possessing an autonomy and freedom that cannot be fully grasped or comprehended by the exact sciences concerned with causes and effects. Marx had taught the philosopher to be suspicious of all 'tentativi di mettere le brache al mondo e di persuadere gli adulti a farsi bambini',<sup>140</sup> and it was the Marxist critique which led Croce to adopt a demystified approach to reality.

Important for our purposes, we find, in the programme, from the very beginning, Croce expressing the need for

Un' 'idealismo nuovo' da designarsi meglio come *idealismo critico* o *idealismo realistico* e perfino ... come *idealismo antimetafisico*.<sup>141</sup>

The above passage, with its stress on 'antimetaphysics' attests to the caution with which Croce employed the term 'idealism'. His use of the qualifiers 'critico' and 'realistico' work in the same direction. The philosopher was fully aware of the *different* nature of his method in relation to classical idealism.

We may well argue with Croce's interpretation of idealism, but if we read him attentively there is no mistaking the fact that far from being identified with a

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>139</sup> E. Jacobitti, *Revolutionary Humanism and Historicism in Modern Italy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 4.

<sup>140</sup> Croce, 'Introduzione', p.3.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

specific philosophical movement, idealism represented for him a critical, realistic and antimetaphysical attitude which had to be adopted by historiography and literary criticism. Indeed, we have seen that Croce was well aware of the fact that when one approaches history, for instance, there is no immutable 'reality' to which one refers with *complete objectivity*. There are instead 'theories', hence ideas, which we employ to refer to this 'reality'. The naïve approach to reality which mistakes theories for facts does not take into account that

Ogni fatto ... è già una teoria ... il ... semplice è un composto ... I fatti, ... sono alcuni pretesi fatti, limitati quantitativamente, e manipolati ed alterati qualitativamente.<sup>142</sup>

The target of Croce's polemic was the attitude of

molte persone geniali che, infischiandosi della storia delle idee e dei fatti, si mettono a risolvere audacemente ardue questioni sulle quali l'uomo si è travagliato per secoli, sicure di afferrarle con un colpo sbrigativo della loro asserita genialità.<sup>143</sup>

Research in the humanities required, Croce maintained, a much more complex weaponry, based on documentation and philology ('il metodo della ricerca e della documentazione')<sup>144</sup> and the clear awareness, on the part of the historian or literary critic, of the need to promote 'un determinato ordine d'idee'.<sup>145</sup> Hence, here, by 'idealism' Croce meant the acknowledgement of the *structuring role* of ideas and values whenever one begins to expound a theory, and not the illusion that idealism can provide a ready-made and systematized mirror copy of reality itself. It is not incidental that in the programme of *La Critica* we do not find any reference to Hegel whose philosophy would be 'digested' by Croce only later in his career when the core of his method was already formed. The analysis accomplished by Croce would be similar to that on Marx: 'deconstruction' of certain components useful for clarifying some specific problems of history and for the elimination of all metaphysical elements.

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<sup>142</sup> B. Croce, 'Il sofisma della filosofia empirica', *La Critica*,vi (1907), pp. 495-98, (p. 497).

<sup>143</sup> Croce, 'Introduzione', p.4.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p.2.

On the other hand, it is undoubtedly true that Gentile, who was editing the strictly philosophical section of *La Critica* was attracted by Hegel. However, we have seen that Croce did have a different view of the German philosopher as the following extract from an article dated 1904 shows:

Che fossimo *hegeliani o neohegeliani*, non ce n'eravamo accorti. Io per conto mio (*parlo per un istante in prima persona singolare*) ho nel mio modesto bagaglio parecchie critiche della filosofia della storia e dell'estetica hegeliana; nè della metafisica in genere mi sono sinora mostrato troppo tenero.<sup>146</sup>

In this chapter it has been shown that what we called Croce's intellectual apprenticeship, far from being conditioned by an alleged obsession with an idealistic project, was mainly concerned with finding a direction, namely a specific *method* for his research in literature and historiography. This search for a method was accompanied by a number of works on local history and literature and a continuous dialogue with European ideas and trends.

Moreover, it has been shown that this inquiry was driven by a strong *antimetaphysical posture* which is revealed to be the main feature of Croce's theoretical preoccupations. Indeed we have seen that, from the early dissertation delivered at the Accademia Pontaniana through the scrupulous deconstruction of Marxism and the conflict-dialogue with Gentile up to the drafting of the programme of *La Critica*, Croce's chief preoccupation was to root his work on a solid conception of knowledge in close contact with the problems of his time, and capable of grasping the 'particularities' of the world in a manner which avoided the abstract systematization with which he has been associated. It should be said at this point that Croce, when founding his journal, was still within what we might call a predominantly negative phase of his epistemology. He was clearer about the 'grand discourses' to be rejected than he was about the precise features of the approach to analysis in the humanistic disciplines he wished to propose. The advantages of the grand theories of history, whether Marxist or Hegelian, which he rejected, was that they offered ready-made schemes of historical analysis from which clear methodologies could flow. Croce was in the uncomfortable position of not being able to adopt such methods of analysis, at least with their all-encompassing claims.

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<sup>146</sup> B. Croce, 'Siamo noi hegeliani?' in *La Critica* iii (1904), pp. 261-64 (p. 202). Italics mine.

What can, however, be partially salvaged from the claims made about Croce's idealism is that this philosophy offered him a terrain from which he would be able to begin to chart his own itinerary in a more positive way.

The following chapter will delineate the uncharacteristic 'idealism' that Croce employed to solve the problem of method in his theory of history. If we focus our attention on the 'system' that Croce was supposedly building up, we misunderstand his objectives and miss the most original features of his thought. To construct grand narratives, essentially a metaphysical project, was for Croce an impossible task, and he would maintain this position until the end of his life. To focus on his three-volume *Filosofia dello Spirito* as the creation of an idealistic system is to misread the enterprise. Attention to his *method* of analysis makes it very clear that he consistently opposed grand narratives of this kind. In a postmodern epoch, this is easier to understand. In this sense, Croce was ahead of his time, and subsequently fell victim to readings which were not attuned to his major theoretical preoccupations.

## CHAPTER THREE

### EPISTEMOLOGY OF HISTORY

#### 3.1 THE GIOLITTIAN ERA (1901-1914)

Having outlined the embryonic features of Croce's antimetaphysical terrain, we will now begin to examine how these are developed with particular regard to the problem of history and historiography. But first we need some preliminary clarifications on both Croce's activity during the years between 1900 and 1914 and the intentions behind his *Filosofia dello Spirito*.

This period is usually considered to be that of Croce's prime. Referring to it Gramsci even talked about a 'dittatura culturale' of the philosopher. It is undoubtedly true that the philosopher represented, to a certain extent, the 'centro di convergenza dei movimenti intellettuali del tempo.'<sup>1</sup> Indeed, at the turn of the 20th century Croce had already published a series of studies on Marxism (*Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica*), on history (*La rivoluzione napoletana del 1799* and *La Spagna nella vita italiana durante la Rinascenza*) and literature (*I teatri di Napoli dal Rinascimento alla fine del secolo*) in addition to a large number of publications in journals in Italy and abroad. In this period, Croce had direct links with many major European intellectuals, such as George Sorel in France, Windelband and Vossler in Germany and Collingwood in Britain.

*La Critica* soon established itself as one of the most widely read periodicals and in 1903 Croce supported, financially and intellectually, the young publisher Giovanni Laterza in the launching of what would become one of the most important cultural enterprises in Italy. Talking about the publishing house Daniela Coli reported:

Sorta all'inizio del novecento in una Puglia completamente emarginata dal panorama editoriale italiano, [Laterza] riuscì ... a diventare centro di diffusione culturale in grado di sostenere il confronto con le più riuscite esperienze europee.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than entrust his intellectual efforts to established publishers, which would have been the easier route for the 'detached intellectual' which much Crocean mythology

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<sup>1</sup> Bobbio, *Profilo ideologico del Novecento italiano*, p.74.

<sup>2</sup> D.Coli, *Croce, Laterza e la cultura europea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1983), p.7.

has created, he chose to invest his money in an obscure southern Italian publishing house, which tells us something about his practical and concrete commitment to the 'Mezzogiorno'.

International eminence had come with the publication of *Estetica* in 1902 which was hailed as an avant-garde book on the theory of art and attracted a number of admirers from the very start, including such figures as Marinetti and the Futurists in general. The work became so significant that the Italian philosopher was invited to a conference at the University of Houston, Texas. He did not take part in the conference but sent a paper which became one of his most popular books, *Breviario di Estetica*, a sort of elaboration and summary of his first oeuvre. In 1923 the philosopher received the degree *ad honorem* from Oxford University and in 1929 the *Encyclopedia Britannica* commissioned Croce to write an entry on *Aesthetics*.<sup>3</sup>

The *Estetica* was followed by *Logica*<sup>4</sup> and *Filosofia della Pratica* (1909). The three books formed the so-called *Filosofia dello Spirito* and made Croce one of the most prominent philosophers of his time. Croce embodied a new way of conceiving culture, with his wit and ingenuity in tackling cultural and political issues and a polemical attitude towards Italian academia. Croce's popularity lay in his ability to speak to a very diversified audience. Many young Italian intellectuals found in the philosopher an ally in the renewal of the stifling climate of Italian culture, and historians and literary critics were soon to face, for the first time, a set of problems of which they did not even suspect the existence. However, despite Croce's great success we cannot talk about 'cultural dictatorship.' In reality, a closer look at the cultural climate of the time presents us with a varied and multifaceted intellectual Italy. For the first time the country was experiencing the feeling of independence and democracy and this was reflected in all aspects of life, including culture.

The general elections in 1900 inaugurated the so-called Giolittian era which witnessed a period of enormous economic expansion and social change. In addition to creating sufficient social and political stability for the development of industry and commerce, especially in the North, the 'social pact' between the prime minister and

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<sup>3</sup> See 'Aesthetics', in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed., 1929, pp.263-72. The essay was later published in Italian with the title *Aesthetica in nuce*.

<sup>4</sup> Croce drafted an early version of his *Logica* in 1905, 'Lineamenti di una logica come scienza del concetto puro', a dissertation presented at the Accademia Pontaniana in Naples. However, he recast it entirely for the definitive second edition published in 1908. The original version of the *Logica* is collected in A. Attisani (ed.), *La prima forma della 'Estetica' e della 'Logica'* (Messina: Principato, 1924).

the founder of the Socialist Party Filippo Turati, allowed Italy to introduce the first modern welfare measures, such as the limit of eleven hours of work for women and the suppression of child labour, forbidding the employment of children under the age of twelve. Furthermore, in exchange for Turati keeping the extreme left in order Giolitti would attempt to stop censorship and anti-union legislation. The government's new policy would be to intervene as little as possible in labour disputes. Also, one of the most important changes before 1914 was the general increase in literacy. Although illiteracy was still high compared to other European countries, it was decreasing very rapidly. Thus the press boom of the period was a natural effect of greater literacy. Croce's activity was part of this new atmosphere of regeneration.

Indeed, there was a proliferation of journals and publishing houses, particularly in Florence, Rome, Turin, Naples and Milan. Besides the daily papers such as *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa*, *Giornale d'Italia* and *Il Mattino* there were many monthly publications. The periodical *Leonardo*, based in Florence and directed by the intellectual maverick Giovanni Papini, *La Voce* edited by Giuseppe Prezzolini and *Il Regno* by Corradini, are only some examples of the thriving cultural life of pre-Fascist Italy. There were also a number of Catholic publications, gravitating around periodicals like *Cenobium* or *Rinnovamento*, which would later create modernism, an influential movement which injected a heavy dose of historicist thinking into Catholicism. Alongside this movement, eventually condemned by the Church, there was the powerful Neo-Thomist revival in all areas of Catholic thinking rivalling the philosophies of Croce and Gentile. All these movements and periodicals were producing effects in the cultural life the country which render the frequently vaunted thesis of a Crocean 'cultural dictatorship' naïve in the extreme.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps because of their mix of devotion and antagonism intellectuals like Gramsci, Salvemini<sup>6</sup> and Togliatti later blew the cultural role of Croce out of proportion.

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<sup>5</sup>In this respect, Martin Clark's view on Croce's role at the beginning of the twentieth century appears, to say the least, simplistic: 'Croce's friendship with the publisher Giovanni Laterza enabled him to issue hundreds of suitable books or translations of literature, philosophy and history, and virtually control what literate people read.' M. Clark, *Modern Italy 1871-1995* (London and New York: Longman, 1998), p. 173. For a thorough account of the life of these periodicals see the irreplaceable Garin, *Cronache di filosofia italiana*, pp.21-43.

<sup>6</sup>Gaetano Salvemini (1873-1957), who spent twenty years in exile fighting Fascism, contributed to a distorted reception of Croce's philosophy abroad. During his stay in America, teaching history at the University of Harvard, he wrote a number of articles against the 'abstruse' Croce's 'idealist' philosophy, considering the philosopher a political adversary. See R. Vivarelli (ed.), *Scritti sul fascismo*, Vol. 3 (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974), p. 440.

There is also the myth of a conservative Croce hostile to young intellectuals. In reality, in this period, up until when his famous polemical interview on the death of Socialism appeared in *La Voce* in 1911,<sup>7</sup> Croce's political sympathies were still for the left,<sup>8</sup> although he had made clear that he intended to keep the theoretical and the political spheres separate. In his private life, moreover, Croce had an unconventional relationship with Angelina Zampanelli, a working class woman who was his partner till her death from heart disease in 1913.<sup>9</sup> We should not forget that in Catholic Italy a relationship with a woman outside marriage was considered extremely improper.

Furthermore, many of the young intellectuals to whom Croce was supposed to be hostile published their works with Laterza or collaborated with the publishing house; among them Nitti, Giovanni Amendola, Gobetti, Leone Ginsburg, Papini, Prezzolini and many others.<sup>10</sup> Giuseppe Prezzolini, who in 1909 would become the first biographer of Croce wrote:

Devo al Croce l'ordine delle cose umane, la fede nel mondo storico, la conquista dell'umanità di me stesso, la vita morale, il dovere dello sforzo, il bisogno d'una disciplina, la visione dell'umile giornata come una missione, il senso dell'eroico quotidiano prosaico: l'equilibrio ... il valore dell'uomo di genio (ma anche dell'imbecille e il valore del

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<sup>7</sup> B. Croce, 'La morte del socialismo italiano' in *La Voce*, iii (1911), pp. 501-2.

<sup>8</sup> Croce paid a considerable subscription of a thousand lire in support of the Socialist paper *L'Avanti* and made friends with Filippo Turati. Moreover, Giolitti rejected his senatorship because he was considered by the police as Socialist 'sympathiser and supporter': 'Nel 1896, per la nascita dell'*Avanti*, il giornale del partito socialista fondato in Italia nel 1892, Benedetto Croce sottoscrisse mille lire: una somma allora ragguardevole ... Quando Giustino Fortunato lo propose a Giolitti ... per la nomina a senatore del Regno emerse nelle informazioni di ufficio formate dai carabinieri la sottoscrizione ... e dovette tener conto di quel precedente considerato negativo per i criteri dell'epoca.' G. Galasso, 'L' "Avanti!" applaudi il "compagno Croce"', *Corriere della Sera*, 25 October 2001. During the Fascist dictatorship Croce continued his relationship with Turati meeting him and other socialists in Paris: 'Personalmente rividi più volte a Parigi Turati, Treves ed altri socialisti ed ebbi con loro relazioni affettuose.' B. Croce, *Nuove pagine sparse*, vol. ii (Bari: Laterza, 1966), p.420. For the friendship between Turati and Croce see S. Bonechi (ed.), *Turati e Croce. Un fascetto di lettere inedite offerto a Mario Agrimi per i suoi settant'anni* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1998). Introduction by E. Garin.

<sup>9</sup> Croce wrote in his *Taccuini*: 'Tristezza di dover rivedere carte e oggetti, in cui si chiude il ricordo di vent'anni di mia vita, spezzati in questo punto. Ho cominciato a riordinare la casa dove sono rimasto solo.' In G. Sasso, *Per invigilare me stesso. I taccuini di lavoro di Benedetto Croce* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1989) pp.36-7. It is interesting to see that the 'illicit' relationship with Zampanelli is not mentioned in Nicolini's 'Olympian' biography on Croce. The mention of the association with a 'popolana' would probably have spoiled the image of a stern and conservative philosopher.

<sup>10</sup> See D. Coli, *Croce, Laterza*, p.8. Croce collaborated with many journals reflecting various political views. He also promoted from *La Critica* the newborn monthly paper *Leonardo*: 'La rivista *Leonardo* è opera di alcuni giovani legati tra loro da una concezione filosofica ... della libertà e dell'azione. E vale certamente meglio delle solite riviste filosofiche dei professori, che infilzano a scopo accademico ossia di "carriera", compilatoriamente, pagine e pensieri altrui, accompagnandoli con pigri e frigidissimi commenti. I redattori del *Leonardo* sono scrittori vivaci e mordaci.' Croce, *Conversazioni critiche*, p.137. For a complete account on the relations between Croce and *La Voce* see P. Colonnello, *Croce e i vociani* (Genoa: Studio Editoriale di Cultura, 1984).



farabutto); la riduzione totale, assoluta, senza residui di Dio nell'uomo; l'accettazione della realtà non criticabile ma su cui costruire.<sup>11</sup>

This statement, which reads like a 'declaration of faith', encapsulates the strong feelings that many of the young had for Croce.

Another young intellectual, the liberal Piero Gobetti (1901-1926), perceptively denounced the risks of a 'beatification' of Croce:

Odio i crociani: sono vuoti, parolai, inerti come gli anticrociani. Li disprezzo quanto ammiro Croce. Chi sono i crociani in Italia? Sono i professori privi di originalità, pedanti, meccanici, che si sono studiati a memoria l'*Estetica dell'intuizione*, facendone un nuovo Vangelo. Sono in una parola quelli che non hanno mai capito Croce. E sono tanti, perchè il destino dei grandi è proprio di essere incompresi. Croce presenta il suo sistema come strumento di lavoro, come punto di partenza per nuove ricerche, e gli incoscienti accettano pigramente il suo sistema per fermarsi. Negano ciò che nel sistema crociano è tutto: lo svolgimento.<sup>12</sup>

We will return to the concept of 'svolgimento' in Croce. It is almost impossible to overstate the extent to which Gobetti was one of the few who understood the intrinsically open outlook of Croce's thought. This component would be noticeably underplayed by later criticism in favour of a Hegelian reading of Croce.

The relations of Croce with many of these young intellectuals changed shortly before the beginning of the First World War, when they adhered enthusiastically to Italy's intervention in the conflict.

Cominciò contro di me – *these are Croce's words reported by his friend and biographer Nicolini*– una sequela e quasi un vezzo di manifestazioni ostili, che non erano già la polemica dei diversamente pensanti nella cerchia intellettuale ... ma il provocato intervento degli incompetenti e ignari a gridar contumelie e a tentar di soffocar pensieri e giudizi, ai quali la loro mente era chiusa.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In I. De Feo, *Croce: l'uomo e l'opera* (Milan: Mondadori, 1975), p.201.

<sup>12</sup> P. Gobetti, 'I Crociani', in *Energie nuove*, II (1919) pp.78-80, now in P. Gobetti, *Scritti politici*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1969), p.46.

<sup>13</sup> F. Nicolini, *Benedetto Croce* (Turin: Utet, 1962), p.269.

From the columns of *Lacerba*, Papini advocated a cathartic bloodletting in the name of a sort of palingenesis for humankind:

L'avvenire, come gli antichi dei delle foreste, ha bisogno di sangue sulla strada. Ha bisogno di vittime, di carneficine ... Il sangue è vino per i popoli forti, il sangue è l'olio di cui hanno bisogno le ruote di questa macchina enorme che vola dal passato al futuro ... Abbiamo bisogno di cadaveri per lastricare le strade di tutti i trionfi ... ben venga l'assassinio generale collettivo.<sup>14</sup>

The same tone was used by Corradini who, paradoxically, saw in the war an important aspect of humanitarianism:

L'umanità è legata alla tragica necessità della guerra, perché, appunto, non è un'unità ma una totalità di popoli ... Le nostre conclusioni sono opposte a quelle degli umanitarii. Questi condannano la guerra per ragioni di umanità; noi al contrario vediamo chiaramente che le sue ultime finalità sono umanitarie.<sup>15</sup>

In this atmosphere of excitement Croce's initial neutral position and his appeal to calm seemed to many of these young a sign of weakness. In reality, Croce was against the nationalistic fever which seemed to have spread among the intellectuals as well as the elites. In 1914, referring to the attitude of most of the Italian press he wrote:

Non si tratta di quesiti razionali, ma di urti di passioni; non di soluzioni logiche, ma di asserzioni d'interessi, che ... sono nazionali ossia particolari; non di ragionamenti, ma di finti ragionamenti costruiti sull'immaginazione.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> G. Papini, 'La vita non è sacra' in *Lacerba*, I, 1913, n.20, p.224. Gramsci gave a significant portrait of Papini's personality: 'In Papini manca la rettitudine morale. Nel primo periodo della sua carriera questo non impressionava, perché Papini basava la sua autorità su se stesso, era il "partito di se stesso". Divertiva, non poteva essere preso sul serio se non da pochi filistei ... Oggi Papini si è inserito in un vasto movimento da cui trae autorità: la sua autorità è divenuta perciò canagliesca nel senso più spregevole, dello sparafucile, del sicario mercenario.' A. Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Turin: Editori Riuniti, 2000), p. 195.

<sup>15</sup> E. Corradini, *Pagine degli anni sacri* (Milan: Treves, 1920), p.250.

<sup>16</sup> B. Croce, *Pagine sulla guerra* (Bari: Laterza, 1965), p. 14.

Moreover, from *La Critica* Croce strongly condemned what he defined as ‘la psicologia dell’odio’ against other countries, unmasking the chauvinistic drive of many intellectuals:

Gran parte del malumore contro le mie noterelle è stato ... suscitato dalla mia avversione agli ‘intellettuali’ che manifestano o promuovono sentimenti di odio contro questo o quel popolo ... Un ... professore, ha, tra gli altri, pubblicato un articolo consigliante l’odio e riboccante di odio contro i tedeschi.<sup>17</sup>

Croce, who had previously focused on the moment of force in history, insisting on Machiavelli and Marx against the abstract values of the Enlightenment tradition, found himself charged with betraying his own ideas. The reaction on the part of many ‘Crociani’ was disbelief and resentment which led them to unleash personal attacks against him. Papini and Marinetti, who had previously praised the *Estetica* for its revolutionary emphasis on creativity and intuition,<sup>18</sup> advocated a Croce against Croce in an apology of chaos and anarchy.

Groups writing for *La Voce*, *Leonardo*, *Il Regno* and *Hermes*, transformed the journals into propaganda machines; they began a slander campaign against non-interventionist intellectuals, singling out Croce as the champion of the chicken-hearted middle class. The ‘Pragmatism’ promoted by Papini, the Futurists and the like, in polemic with Croce’s ‘Idealism’, was a sort of blind interventionism in the name of the supremacy of praxis over theory. Among the others, on the side of the radical Socialists the young Benito Mussolini from the paper *Il Popolo d’Italia* urged the nation to take part in the conflict and abandon prattle in favour of action.<sup>19</sup>

Evoking these years in 1928, during the Fascist dictatorship, Croce remembered:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.116. See also the comments of Gramsci on Croce’s attitude on the First World War: ‘Il Croce reagisce contro l’impostazione popolare (con la conseguente propaganda) della guerra come guerra di civiltà e quindi a carattere religioso.’ A. Gramsci, *Il materialismo storico*, p. 226. And further on, ‘Ciò che importa al Croce è che gli intellettuali ... capiscano che altro è l’ideologia, strumento pratico per governare, e altro la filosofia e la religione che non deve essere prostituita nella coscienza degli stessi sacerdoti.’ Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed account of the influence of Croce’s *Estetica* on movements such as Futurism and ‘ermetismo’ see R. Raggiunti, *Il problema del linguaggio nella filosofia di Benedetto Croce* (Florence, Cadmo, 1997). See also Jean-Louis Ferrier, *Art of the Twentieth Century* (Turin: Édition du Chêne, 1999), p.41. The importance of the poetic element in Croce is discussed by Alberto Caracciolo in *L’estetica e la religione di Benedetto Croce* (Genoa, Tilgher, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Many of these young intellectuals, including Marinetti, Papini and Prezzolini, embraced Fascism and continued the attacks against Croce.

L'ideale socialista, amore di vent'anni innanzi, non parlava più ai giovani, nè a quelli stessi che erano stati allora giovani ... L'immaginazione e la bramosia della nuova generazione, e dei delusi di quella di poco antecedente, si rivolgevano, come già prima in Inghilterra, Germania e Francia, all' 'imperialismo' o 'nazionalismo', del quale padre spirituale fu in Italia il D'Annunzio, che l'aveva preparato sin da giovane con tutta la sua psicologia, culminante nel sogno della sanguinaria e lussuriosa rinascenza borgiana.<sup>20</sup>

The writer Gabriele D'Annunzio, with his rhetoric and nationalism, was by now the real influence for a generation of young Italians.

One can see from the above sketch that Croce's intellectual life, from the very start, far from being the alleged 'Olympian dictatorship', was rather a continuous struggle to clarify and defend his position. In this respect Bobbio is right in maintaining that the philosopher 'fu protagonista, proprio perchè non dimenticò mai in ogni momento di essere antagonista.'<sup>21</sup>

I have attempted to bring out the importance of the Giolittian era for an appreciation of the context and the climate during which Croce was forging his epistemology of history. It was a turbulent period, so that to see it as the phase during which, rising above the contingent issues of the period, Croce produced his 'Olympian' 'filosofia dello spirito', is to associate oneself with those interpreters so rightly taken to task by Gobetti.

Moreover, such a view of Croce's 'filosofia dello spirito' itself entails an epistemological separation between his polemical writings, seen as secondary and theoretically contingent excursions, and his serious and profound philosophising, a view explicitly rejected by the Italian thinker. Indeed, if we want to understand the full extent of the philosopher's antimetaphysical enterprise, we need to be constantly aware of the *polemical targets* to which Croce addressed his criticism. If one takes into account this component, one could understand, if not justify, certain positions taken by the philosopher. After all Croce himself maintained that

Filosofia e critica della filosofia sono la cosa medesima, perchè ... l'aspetto critico, o negativo, è inseparabile dal positivo, e ogni filosofia è sempre *polemica* come si può osservare analizzando qualsiasi scrittura filosofica.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> B.Croce, *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915* (Bari: Laterza, 1967), p. 234.

<sup>21</sup> Bobbio, *Profilo ideologico del Novecento italiano*, p.74.

<sup>22</sup>B.Croce, *Logica come scienza del concetto puro*, (Bari: Laterza, 1971), p.191. Maurice Finocchiaro has acutely remarked that 'Croce was a philosopher, not merely in addition to being a critic but because he was a critic; his philosophy may be the first methodology of criticism in the history of

### 3.2 CROCE'S 'MODES' OF CRITIQUE

Postmodernism has taught us to look at *discontinuity* as a value instead of a defect. In other words, thought does not need to be *systematic* to be culturally or philosophically productive. Philosophers like Nietzsche or Benjamin were *against* systematic thought which, in their view, was unsuitable for philosophical inquiry. Closer to our times, Michel Foucault, in his *Archeology of Knowledge*, has underlined the importance in philosophical discourse of the 'use of concepts of discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, series, and transformation'<sup>23</sup> in order to escape a language which otherwise misrepresents reality. We will see that, despite the common view of Croce as a system builder, his way of thinking was closer to some aspects of postmodernism than to Hegelianism. It is clear that the writings of Croce, like those of Heidegger or Foucault, for instance, involve a sort of reading that Russell, Ayer and Dewey do not. If we consider Croce's thought from this optic the charges of inconsistency that are frequently levelled at his 'system' lose a great deal of force.

In reality, the repeated emphasis on the systematic aspects of Croce's philosophy has concealed the originality of his thought. The 'coherence' of Croce's thinking is in part the result of critiques which have tended to smooth out its contradictions in order to create an idealistic framework, which was then considered to be the main source of his philosophy. However, these critiques seem to forget that Croce himself maintained that

il linguaggio di uno scrittore non è già quello che egli adopera in tutte le sue opere, quasi una media che si ricavi da esse; ma quello che adopera in una data opera, in una data fase del suo pensiero sotto determinate influenze.<sup>24</sup>

If we apply this criterion to Croce we will find that each work has its specific tone which is distorted if we insist on harmonizing it with other works. The philosopher was clear about his project, arguing that it was necessary to have a more dynamic way of conceiving philosophy, to the point of advocating its 'dissolution':

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thought.' M. A. Finocchiaro, *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.29.

<sup>23</sup> M. Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> B.Croce, 'Le contraddizioni degli scrittori', *La Critica*, iii (1906), pp.162-64, (p.163).

Annulare l'idea della filosofia 'generale' è insieme annullare il concetto statico del sistema filosofico, surrogandolo col concetto dinamico delle semplici 'sistemazioni' storiche dei gruppi di problemi, delle quali ciò che persiste e sopravvive sono i singoli problemi e le loro soluzioni, e non già l'aggregato e l'ordinamento esterno, che ubbidisce ai bisogni e ai tempi degli autori e passa con questi, o si serba e si ammira solo per ragioni estetiche, quando pure abbia tal pregio.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the fact that Croce *might* have considered in a certain phase of his thought the possibility of a systematic path does not necessarily mean that the philosophical significance of the thinker remained within this feature. In reality, the most fertile part of Croce's thought lies beyond his alleged idealism, which might indeed be a component, but certainly not the most important one, of his philosophy.

The years between 1900 and 1914 are generally considered to be those of the 'systematization' of Croce's philosophy in which the thinker abandoned the purported naïve realism of his youth and embraced Hegelian idealism.<sup>26</sup> Critics traditionally distinguish three periods in Croce's thought: a pre-idealistic phase in which the young philosopher tried to relate history to art, the celebrated phase of the *Philosophy of the Spirit* in which Croce embraced idealism, and a final period after Fascism with the crumbling of the 'system' and the emergence of the 'vital', the obscure force which lies behind the rational 'Spirit.'<sup>27</sup> Such interpretations consider the *Philosophy of the Spirit* the peak of Croce's work and insist on the overarching philosophical and

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<sup>25</sup> B. Croce, *Logica come scienza del concetto puro* (Bari: Laterza, 1971), p.x.

<sup>26</sup> Gino Bedani, for instance, maintains that Croce departed from an 'epistemological framework of uncritical realism' to 'shift into its opposite, idealism'. G. Bedani, 'Art, poetry and science: theory and rhetoric in Croce's early anti-positivist epistemology', *Italian Studies*, 49 (1994), p.93.

<sup>27</sup> This is roughly the scheme we find in the already mentioned *Benedetto Croce, la ricerca della dialettica* by Gennaro Sasso. See also Paolo Bonetti, *Introduzione a Croce* (Bari: Laterza, 1992). Michele Maggi in his recent *La filosofia di Benedetto Croce* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1998) addresses this problem which has been an obstacle to a correct understanding of Croce's task. In his opinion Croce's philosophy suffered from a 'closed' interpretation which assimilated the philosopher to German idealism. On the other hand, an excessively ideologically orientated interpretation of Croce's thought has led to a marginalization of his position. However, Maggi's way of showing Croce's relevance nowadays is very similar to Sasso's *La ricerca della dialettica*. Indeed, it emphasizes the final phase of the philosopher in which the reflections on the 'end of civilization' make Croce a sort of existentialist. This interpretation, despite its good intentions, neglects Croce's original contributions to literary criticism and historiography and avoids once again the crucial question of the method in his philosophy. For a further discussion of Maggi's book on Croce see the already quoted D. D. Roberts 'Maggi's Croce, Sasso's Gentile', pp.116-25.

conceptual unity of the three volumes which allegedly form the all-encompassing 'Crocean system.'<sup>28</sup>

However, this view does not square with the image of Croce we have sketched so far. Indeed, we have seen that the main aim of the young thinker was to develop his research in *specific* fields, namely history and literary criticism, avoiding grand schemes and concentrating on the issues and methodologies which were directly connected to those disciplines. We have also defined this attitude as *antimetaphysical*, since it aimed to avoid abstract questions and concentrate on the nature and the limits of well-defined subjects, namely history and literary criticism. Why would Croce have diverged from this original purpose in order to build a 'metaphysical' system of thought?

Moreover, if we go on to consider the three books of the so-called *Filosofia dello Spirito* more closely, we find that the compact and rigid structure of the works is more apparent than real. Indeed we will see that each book can be considered as a work on its own exploring a main theme with open-mindedness. Each work has its own 'centre of gravity' and should be analyzed accordingly without a preconceived view on Croce's position. In this respect, the label 'Hegelian'<sup>29</sup> or 'neo-Hegelian' has undoubtedly contributed to the discrediting of Croce's philosophy, despite the philosopher's repeated denials:

La ... mia concezione è stata più volte chiamata ... 'hegelismo' o 'neohegelismo'; ma potrebbe altresì chiamarsi, a libito e con pari diritto, 'nuovo positivismo', 'nuovo kantismo', 'nuova teoria dei valori', 'nuovo vichismo' e via dicendo: denominazioni che tutte, come la prima, non ne colgono il carattere proprio.<sup>30</sup>

And further, in the same book Croce insisted:

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<sup>28</sup> See for instance the introduction to the recent *The Legacy of Benedetto Croce*, p.5 in which Massimo Verdicchio maintains that ' Croce's three-volume *Filosofia dello Spirito* ' is 'based on a refinement of Kant and Hegel, to develop a systematic understanding of human knowledge and activity.'

<sup>29</sup> 'Hegeliano è il sistema del pensiero crociano e l'*animus* che lo percorre. Per quanto il filosofo napoletano cerchi di prendere le distanze da Hegel ... manifesta un debito essenziale nei confronti dell'autore dell'*Enciclopedia*.' S. Nicolosi, 'Dialettica hegeliana ed eterodossia crociana' in A. Bruno (ed.), *Benedetto Croce trent'anni dopo* (Bari: Laterza, 1983), p. 222. See also Caserta: 'His [Croce's] historicism, in truth, is a modernized version of Hegelianism.' *Croce and Marxism*, p. 40.

<sup>30</sup> Croce, *Contributo*, p.58.

*La Filosofia come scienza dello Spirito*, da me disegnata, non è la prosecuzione, ma la totale eversione dello hegelismo.<sup>31</sup>

The essentially non-Hegelian nature of Croce's thought, first suggested by Hayden White, has been recently stressed by David D. Roberts who finds the 'centre of gravity' of Croce's philosophy in his 'absolute historicism'.<sup>32</sup> Although I am in debt to Roberts for the suggestion of Croce's non-Hegelian perspective, I do not share either the methods or the conclusions of his analysis. Indeed, in order to make Croce more relevant to contemporary thought, Roberts relates the philosopher to virtually all contemporary currents of thought. The result is a rather distorted image of a Croce as a 'precursor' of the main philosophical trends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from Existentialism to Psychoanalysis, from Hermeneutics to Structuralism. The conclusions of Roberts' book are also disappointing since he fails to explain where the originality of Croce's thought lies. Indeed, despite the insistence on Croce's 'absolute historicism' as the hub of the philosopher's thought, Roberts does not explain *how* the philosopher constructed it, namely his *method*. Moreover, according to Roberts, Croce, in his historicism, did not question the role of *method* and *narrative* in history and relied partly on a 19<sup>th</sup> century conception of history.<sup>33</sup> In reality, Croce began his investigations on the nature of history and the arts *precisely because* he intended to find a suitable method for these disciplines, and one of his first and major concerns was the question of objectivity in the humanities. However, despite its limitations, Roberts's book remains one of the most important contributions for a new understanding of Croce's thought.

All philosophical and scientific doctrines, in Croce, are regarded as partial visions of truth, which we must expect to be replaced sooner or later by more suitable ones. This is a basic principle of the history of ideas and requires humility as well as flexibility, since it denies all definitive answers.<sup>34</sup> The letter to the philologist Karl Vossler (1872-1949), dated 9<sup>th</sup> June 1910, with its rejection of the idea of a definitive system, expresses clearly Croce's view on this point:

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.59.

<sup>32</sup> Roberts, *Benedetto Croce*, p.17.

<sup>33</sup> 'Croce made a promising beginning in rejecting the generally positivist canons, but in retrospect we can see that he only scratched the surface of these sets of questions about the active role of the historian.' Ibid., p.285.



Non credo al sistema nel senso tradizionale, e cioè come carcere in cui si chiuda la verità e tutta la verità. Perciò non ho inteso dare un *sistema* in questo senso; ma nel senso puramente letterario che in tre volumi ho trattato tutti i problemi che mi hanno occupato, naturalmente connettendoli tra di loro. Ora è assai improbabile che abbia risolto bene i problemi tutti che mi sono proposto.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, following Croce's own indications, we can talk about a 'system' of the Philosophy of the Spirit only '*nel senso puramente letterario*', a style of discourse which enabled him, as he said himself, to reflect on all the problems which had occupied his mind. His weak statement ('naturalmente connettendoli fra di loro') of connections between the various strands of his thought was misread by many commentators and transformed into a tight idealist system.<sup>36</sup> If we regard the *Filosofia dello Spirito* as a series of open explorations in specific fields *related* but not rigidly connected which each other, we might be able to understand Croce's purpose better. This latter interpretation insists on the *normative* value of the philosophy of the spirit rather than an *ontological* one. Within this perspective, the *Estetica*, *Logica* and *Pratica* are not monuments to Beauty, Truth, Useful, and Good but simply 'strumenti di lavoro' that Croce used to develop his research in specific fields of inquiry:

Ogni filosofo, alla fine di una sua ricerca, intravede le prime incerte linee di un'altra, che egli medesimo, o chi verrà dopo di lui, eseguirà. E con questa modestia ... io metto termine al mio lavoro, porgendolo ai ben disposti come strumento di lavoro.<sup>37</sup>

This interpretation, which considers Croce's philosophy as an 'intellectual instrument' rather than a metaphysics, had been perceived by Gramsci as a possibility:

È da porre addirittura la questione se ... il crocismo ... non sia essenzialmente una 'tecnica' ... La tecnica del pensiero, elaborata come tale, ... darà giudizi di controllo e correggerà le storture del modo di pensare del senso comune.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> 'L'infinità della filosofia, il suo continuo cangiare, non è un fare e disfare, ma un continuo *superarsi*: la nuova proposizione filosofica è possibile solamente mercè l'antica'. Croce, *Logica*, p. 189.

<sup>35</sup> B. Croce, *Carteggio Croce-Vossler 1899-1949* (Bari: Laterza, 1983), p.129.

<sup>36</sup> The critic Cesare Luporini encapsulates this position: 'Forse Croce è stato l'ultimo filosofo, di rilevanza internazionale a produrre un sistema ... È questo un aspetto, visto oggi, molto arcaico.' L. Colletti, A. Del Noce, C. Luporini, R. Romero, 'I conti con Benedetto Croce', *Mondoperaio*, 12 (1982), pp. 75-86, (p. 77).

<sup>37</sup> B. Croce, *Filosofia della Pratica: economia ed etica* (Bari: Laterza, 1973), p.406.

<sup>38</sup> A. Gramsci, *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*, pp. 74-75.

Hence, it offers a *technique* rather than a dogmatic set of rules, and this technique enables us to form critical judgements on reality. And we already know that, for Croce, philosophy can be conceived ultimately as a critique which is not different in essence from the ordinary thinking of what Croce calls ‘common sense’ (*buon senso*).<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, its unremitting questioning leads to a greater depth of theoretical inquiry:

Ecco, dunque dove soltanto può essere collocato l’orgoglio del filosofo: nella coscienza della maggiore intensità delle sue domande e delle sue risposte.<sup>40</sup>

Even when the philosopher adopted an exterior ‘systematic’ framework, as in the case of the *Filosofia dello Spirito* he did not intend to build a definitive philosophy since he made clear that no philosophy ‘può pretendere a valore di totalità, o ... di soluzione *definitiva*.’<sup>41</sup> In reality, Croce with the philosophy of the spirit aimed precisely at avoiding all metaphysical conceptions, and wished to construct an epistemology which would avoid reductionism.

Also, the bizarre-sounding word ‘Spirito’, if correctly understood, does not create any particular problem. Indeed, with ‘spirit’ Croce indicated the free activity of our mind as opposed to mind as a passive instrument of study for Psychology. Many critics tend to equate the word ‘spirito’ with the German ‘Geist’.<sup>42</sup> However, we should not forget that this term has its own complex philosophical tradition in Italy. Indeed, philosophers like Giordano Bruno, Campanella, Telesio and Vico used it to express human immanence as opposed to the transcendental world. Moreover, Croce

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<sup>39</sup>‘Ogni uomo ha una sua filosofia, rudimentale o sviluppata, più o meno lacunosa, e nessuno è uomo di nessuna filosofia. Il più povero giudizio sull’attività pratica è guidato dal lume di un concetto filosofico.’ Croce, *Pratica*, p. 66. See also Gramsci: ‘l’attività del Croce si presenta essenzialmente come critica, incomincia col distruggere una serie di pregiudizi tradizionali, col mostrare falsi e inconcludenti una serie di problemi che erano il comico “dada” dei filosofi precedenti ecc., identificandosi in ciò con l’atteggiamento che verso questo vecchiume aveva sempre mostrato il senso comune.’ Gramsci, *Il materialismo storico*, p.232.

<sup>40</sup>B. Croce, *Breviario di estetica*, (Bari: Laterza, 1913), p.11. Croce maintained that there was no difference in *essence* between philosophy and what he called ‘pensiero ingenuo’: ‘Il pensiero ingenuo ... meglio forse si chiamerebbe sommariamente o germinalmente filosofico ... Che cosa manca al pensiero ingenuo, alla filosofia germinale? Implicitamente nulla ... La verità dunque assai diversa per il grado di elaborazione, non potrà non essere sostanzialmente la stessa; ed è cattivo segno quando la filosofia è in contrasto con la coscienza ingenua.’ B.Croce, *Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto della filosofia di Hegel* (Bari: Laterza, 1967), p.13.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>‘Croce picked up the troublesome term “the spirit”, of course, from Hegel and the German idealist tradition.’ Roberts, *Benedetto Croce*, p.63.

was not interested in producing a complicated linguistic apparatus to expound his view. Rather than reading ‘spirito’ in a transcendentalist Hegelian sense, we should bear in mind that Croce often deliberately chose simple terms, used words in their everyday sense. For instance, when we refer to the ‘spirit of the age’ or ‘times’ we simply refer to a set of ideas, beliefs and aims which are typical of a particular period in history. Besides, Croce specified:

Non c’è di là lo spirito di qua l’uomo, di là una provvidenza, di qua un fantoccio che tira i fili, di là un universale e di qua un individuale ma ... lo spirito ... non è altro che la stessa vita che noi viviamo, logica di questa vita.<sup>43</sup>

In connection with this clearest of statements about the ‘immanent’ meaning Croce attaches to his use of the term ‘spirito’, it is remarkable how little attention, with few exceptions, has been given to the simple fact that in Hegel it is a predominantly ‘transcendentalist’ concept, which underpins his whole philosophy of history, whereas in the case of Croce it is *never* used in this sense.

In reality, Croce, interested in the activity of mind, used the concept of ‘spirito’ in order to distinguish this sphere of activity from those more adequately analyzed by the exact sciences. It is true, however, that Croce’s idea of philosophy was, in a broad sense, a spiritual one, namely a constant exercise in change and critical modification, an open approach to ‘truth’ which was to be achieved through constant effort. In this sense, for Croce, philosophy was ‘love of wisdom’ and in this sense his philosophy can be called ‘philosophy of the spirit’, since it presupposed the ‘human spirit’:

La filosofia dello spirito, cioè la filosofia vera e propria ... in verità non è stata mai, per lo meno da Socrate in poi, se non indagine dello spirito umano.<sup>44</sup>

However, we should not mistake Croce’s undertaking as a kind of *moralistic* reflection on humanity. In this sense, I am uneasy with the interpretation of many

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<sup>43</sup> Croce, *Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto*, p 84.

<sup>44</sup> B. Croce, *Discorsi di varia filosofia*, vol. I (Bari: Laterza, 1945), p.76.

Croceans<sup>45</sup> who read the whole of Croce's work as directed toward the development of a *single* philosophical path in which ethics is the core. Of course, one of Croce's concerns was to preserve values as an essential part of knowledge. This should really be seen as a permanently-abiding component integrated into the fabric of human cognition, rather than a reference to 'moral judgements' which can be applied to particular situations or even historical events. Nevertheless it is obvious that each book that Croce wrote was dictated by a specific concern or approach which went beyond the simple defence of the humanities. In other words Ethics does not occupy a privileged position in Croce's philosophy, although at times the thinker felt the need to emphasize its role.

Following this reading of the philosophy of the spirit, Aesthetics, Logic, Economics and Ethics are useful tools to *distinguish* different fields of philosophical inquiry which require different methods. In this perspective, understanding, for Croce, is an activity aimed at clarifying problems in which we can distinguish different forms. Discrimination (*distinzione*) between different modes of cognition enables us to give meaningful judgements on reality; hence, different spheres of the philosophical critique require different methods or 'modes'. Indeed, Croce argued in his *Logica* that knowing is a continuous process of clarification through questions in tune with the problem we are facing. He maintained that

Ogni definizione è la risposta a una domanda, la soluzione di un problema; e non vi sarebbe luogo a pronunciarla se noi non facessimo domande e non ci proponessimo problemi. Perché ci daremmo quell'incomodo? Quale bisogno ci costringerebbe? Come ogni atto dello spirito la definizione nasce da un contrasto, da un travaglio, da una guerra che invoca pace, da un'oscurità che cerca luce, ossia, come abbiamo detto, è una domanda che chiede risposta. Né solamente la risposta suppone la domanda, ma tale risposta, tale domanda. La risposta deve essere intonata alla domanda, perché altrimenti non sarebbe risposta, ma elusione di risposta. Il che torna a dire che la natura della domanda colora di sé la risposta, e che una definizione, considerata nella sua concretezza, appare determinata dal problema che la fa sorgere.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See for instance Vincenzo Terenzio, 'La storiografia fra etica e politica' in *Rassegna di studi crociani*, 2 (1991), pp. i-iv. Terenzio reads in Croce 'una marcata ispirazione moralistica' which results in a sort of 'provvidenzialismo storico.' (p.i).

<sup>46</sup> Croce, *Logica*, *ibid.*, pp.126-27.

The formulation of a problem within a specific domain enables us to look for a clarification of it which will remove the threatening mystery of the unknown and render 'familiar' the 'unfamiliar', to use an expression of Hayden White.<sup>47</sup> For Croce,

la filosofia vera e propria, ben diversa dalle esangui disquisizioni e trattazioni delle scuole ... soddisfa i bisogni col *rimuovere le oscurità mentali* che la travagliano ... Ella, non che pascersi di una sterile contemplazione e adorazione della divina vita dell'universo ... si travaglia partecipando alla continua creazione di un mondo sempre nuovo.<sup>48</sup>

The *context* in which a question is posed is fundamental ('la risposta deve essere intonata alla domanda') since it defines its relevance. This leads us to discuss the Crocean division of domains, or 'modes', within philosophical and historical inquiry.

Croce, partly inspired by the philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744),<sup>49</sup> believed that our logical knowledge is based on non-logical premises, which Croce called intuition.<sup>50</sup> An intuition is characterized by its *figurative* form and is the basis of logical thought although independent of it. Indeed, it is what the philosopher called the intuitive or expressive moment of the mind. The emphasis on a non-intellectual form of knowledge, epistemologically prior to the logical one, is one of the most original features of Croce's *Estetica* although the Italian philosopher was not alone in the discovery of another dimension of the 'spirit', or the activity of our mind. Indeed, *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Freud is dated 1900, *L'Evolution Créatrice* by Bergson was written in 1907. Between the two works stands *L'Estetica* (1902). Both Croce and Bergson talked about intuition as a mental faculty, both philosophers found science limiting and unsuitable for expressing the real movement of life. For both philosophers, there is a different dimension in the human mind which had not yet been explored, and which required to be theoretically acknowledged. Of course the

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<sup>47</sup> H. White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p.5.

<sup>48</sup> Croce, *Il carattere*, p.22. Italics mine.

<sup>49</sup> 'From Vico ... Croce derived what was most vital and imaginative in his own theoretical work. Vico had been the earliest of his philosophical masters – as he was the first in historical time and geographically the closest to home.' H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979), p. 208.

<sup>50</sup> 'Continuamente si fa appello, nella vita ordinaria, alla conoscenza intuitiva. Si dice che di certe verità non si possono dare definizioni; che non si dimostrano per sillogismi; che conviene apprenderle

positions of Croce and Bergson are different, even if the starting point is the same, namely, to highlight creative activity which cannot be thought within the confines of scientific knowledge. Bergson would come to identify intuition with the ‘*durée*’, the becoming of consciousness, and this interpretation would be highly influential in contemporary literature at the beginning of the century. The ‘stream of consciousness’ style developed by such writers as Joyce, Proust and Woolf is just one example of the influence of Bergson’s ‘intuition’. However the notion of intuition in the French philosopher would have an irrational outcome, relegating history, logic and science to an inferior position and privileging what Bergson called the ‘personal’ and ‘authentic’ dimension of knowledge. Croce, instead, devised a framework for the cognitive faculties avoiding the extremes of both scientism and mysticism alike.

Intuition and expression in Croce are synonyms.<sup>51</sup> This stage coincides with the spontaneous production of language before all conceptualizations. Here language is considered in its creative element which, for Croce, is an essential part of the activity of our mind.<sup>52</sup> Expression is not *qualitatively* different from poetry and art. Strictly speaking, Croce maintained, expression *is* poetry.<sup>53</sup> Hence, poetry, in its figurative and symbolic dimension, represents the essence of language. For Croce, poetry and art *create* language since they are essentially a dimension of our mind, or ‘una forma della coscienza’.<sup>54</sup> They create the world of words, images and symbols we use. In this sense, for Croce, Vico was right when he maintained that poetry was the childhood of humanity.<sup>55</sup> However, Croce transforms Vico’s chronological division into a mental or ‘spiritual’ one.<sup>56</sup> This is the *aesthetic* ‘mode’ which is the first stage of Croce’s epistemological framework.

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intuitivamente.’ B. Croce, *Estetica come scienza dell’espressione e linguistica generale. Teoria e storia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1990), p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> ‘La conoscenza intuitiva è la conoscenza espressiva. Indipendente e autonoma rispetto all’intellezione; indifferente alle discriminazioni di realtà e irrealtà.’ Croce, *Estetica*, p.16.

<sup>52</sup> See *ibid* pp.181 and 188.

<sup>53</sup> ‘I limiti delle espressioni-intuizioni, che si dicono arte, verso quelle che volgarmente si dicono non – arte è impossibile definirli. Un epigramma appartiene all’arte, perchè no una semplice parola? Una novella appartiene all’arte: perchè no una nota giornalistica?’ *Ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.278.

<sup>55</sup> ‘La poesia è la “lingua materna del genere umano”; i primi uomini “furono da natura sublimi poeti”. Il che viene riconosciuto anche in altro modo da quanti notano che il passaggio ... da sensibilità animale ad attività umana si compie per mezzo del linguaggio (o ... dell’intuizione o espressione in genere).’ *Ibid.*, p.34.

<sup>56</sup> In this respect Croce was much more influenced by Vico than Hegel. In his famous study of the early eighteenth century Italian philosopher (*La filosofia di G. B. Vico*, published in 1911), Croce used the latter’s historical delineation of the three epochs of human ‘modes’ of understanding to form his epistemological distinction. For further elaboration see G. Bedani, *Vico Rivisited. Orthodoxy, Naturalism and Science in the ‘Scienza Nuova’* (Oxford, Hamburg, Munich: Berg, 1989), pp.39 ff.

At a later stage our 'expressions' are shaped into a logical framework which organizes them into a certain order. It is in this *analytical* phase that our 'intuitions' become 'concepts', and try to render identifiable to us the indefinite by means of classification and categorization. Once we have words and images, namely instances of expression, we can create concepts. An 'intuition-expression' can subsist without a concept, but a concept needs expressions to be formed.<sup>57</sup> Here we enter the *logical* 'mode' which is distinct from, but related to, the aesthetic. In order to have a concept, for Croce, we need to have formed intuitions. Intuitions and concepts are the two forms of the *theoretical activity* of the mind.

The theoretical part of the 'spirit' uses intuitions and concepts to make sense of reality. Croce talks about 'creating' reality in the sense that thanks to intuitions and concepts we can make sense of the world. As in Kant, these categories are a priori schemes of our active mind, thus they cannot be demonstrated empirically or by induction. However, we will see later in this chapter that Croce added the historical dimension to them. Thus concepts and history are inextricably connected.

However, not only do we express (aesthetic mode) and conceptualize (logical mode), we also *make use* of our knowledge. In other words in addition to a theoretical activity of the mind there is a practical one. The *practical activity* includes the Economic and Ethical 'modes'. After classifying and categorizing our experiences, both aesthetically and logically we are impelled to manipulate, reproduce them. It is in what Croce called the *economic* 'mode' where we can distinguish a series of practical disciplines such as the exact sciences, politics, and economics.

Finally, not only do we theorize and make use of reality, we also evaluate it in terms of what it is ethically desirable, the good, which is the realm of the *ethical* 'mode'. The economic and moral involve the use of the aesthetic and logical 'modes' although they cannot be reduced to the simple sum of them. However, as in the case of the theoretical 'modes', the practical 'modes' are distinct but related, and the former can subsist without the latter but not vice versa. The Ethical mode presupposes the Economic one. In other words, for Croce 'la moralità vive in concreto nell'utilità'.<sup>58</sup> There is no disinterested ethics, but nonetheless the latter cannot be confused with economics. Indeed, Croce rejects a utilitarian interpretation of Ethics

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<sup>57</sup> 'Se la forma logica è indissolubile da quella grammaticale (estetica), questa non è dissolubile da quella.' *Estetica*, p. 182.

<sup>58</sup> B. Croce, *Pratica*, p.238.

maintaining that not all useful actions are moral actions although moral actions are always useful.<sup>59</sup> For Croce Ethics cannot be reduced to Economics but needs to be considered in distinction from it.

Theory and practice are connected in the same way, they are inter-dependent but *distinct* activities ('attività distinte') of the mind. Croce used the metaphor of the circle (*circolo*) to express the relation between them.<sup>60</sup>

At first sight this epistemological classification may appear rather arid and schematic. On this subject, Garin talked about a kind of mechanical procedure in the 'scheme' of the philosophy of the spirit<sup>61</sup> and there is undoubtedly a rather schematic approach borrowed from the 'trattati' of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Croce himself saw this problem. This is why, after the publication of the *Pratica* in 1909, he stopped writing philosophical treatises in favour of specific inquiries in form of essays. It is remarkable that little or nothing in Croce criticism has been devoted to the study of this break in what amounts to a clearly antimetaphysical intention in his changed style of discourse.

Moreover, if we take into account the *provisional character* that Croce gave to these three books our view may change. Indeed, it has been shown that Croce's theorizing was typically not for its own sake but in response to the demands of a specific historical and critical project. The main aim of the philosopher was to widen and render more dynamic the critical weaponry in the humanities protecting them against the risk of reductionism, and globalizing visions of reality. The aesthetic, logical economic and ethical 'modes' could then be conceived simply as theoretical constructions which enable us to distinguish different aspects of reality which cannot be reduced to a one-dimensional form of knowledge. Hence, the *epistemological*

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<sup>59</sup> It is worth reporting Croce's own words: 'L'utilitarismo, in effetti, ha potuto condurre sempre vittoriosamente la controdimostrazione che non vi sia azione, per alta che si pensi, la quale non risponda a un utile personale; perché l'eroe ha pur il suo utile nel *pro patria mori* ... Ora la polemica corretta non deve assumere l'insostenibile impegno di negare questa evidenza, ma deve anche concedere... che non v'ha azione alcuna la quale non risponda a un libito individuale, perché l'individuo è colui che la compie ... E con ciò ammesso verrà poi a dimostrare ... che l'azione utile può o restare meramente personale o progredire ad un'azione universale-personale, etico-utile; e che per l'appunto l'azione etico-utile è la nuova categoria spirituale, che l'utilitarista non è riuscito a scorgere.' *Ibid.*, p.240.

<sup>60</sup> 'Teoria e pratica, non sono parallele, ma due linee tali che il capo dell'una si congiunge alla coda dell'altra; o se si desidera ancora un simbolo geometrico, esse formano non parallelismo ma *circolo*'. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>61</sup> 'Il movimento si ritrova ... nello sviluppo del pensiero crociano, nel suo scavare dentro ogni problema per farne scaturire nuovi problemi e nuove "soluzioni": ma specialmente le trattazioni sistematiche, i "trattati" assumono fin nell'andamento stilistico una fissità a volte stanca, quasi di catalogo.' Garin, *Cronache*, p.224.



*framework that Croce devised was originally dictated by his aversion towards metaphysics* and represented an attempt to achieve a non-reductive form of criticism.

Furthermore, the four 'modes' can serve as models for historiography. In fact, the distinction between different 'modes' of understanding not only allowed Croce to address different questions according to the specific 'mode' but, most importantly for our purpose, served as a model for historical *discourse* in general. Indeed, it will be shown how the distinctions between an aesthetic, conceptual, political and ethical levels of discourse are the hub of Croce's investigation on the nature of historiography. When we try to come to terms with the *writing of history* we need to take into account all these different 'modes' which are equally important. This is linked to his conviction that any grand scheme will in the end reduce all of the 'modes' to one of them. Thus, in the final analysis a fully-fledged idealism will reduce history to some form of theoretical determinism, the dominance of the economic 'mode' within a Marxist 'metaphysics' will reduce the others to expressions of material conditions, and so forth. In each of them, the autonomous historically creative activity of aspects of human creativity are impoverished. Croce's continuous elaboration of his theory of history is an attempt to retain the full force of each 'mode', together with discourses appropriate for each, with a different emphasis in different periods of his life.

Hence, we can consider the first stage of Croce's reflections on history as the one which focused on the aesthetic mode, with its questioning of the scientific status of historiography and its emphasis on the role of subjectivity and rhetoric. In a second phase Croce explored the conceptual construction of history connecting it with the 'theory of judgement' and the notion of truth which will be the topic of the last section of this chapter. In a later and final stage he explored the relations between history and 'action' with particular attention to the dynamics of ethics and power. These progressive 'readings' or 'modes' of interpreting history do not exclude each other. They could be represented as different strata, or layers which form the backbone of Croce's peculiar 'historicism'. The idealistic aspects in this perspective should not, therefore, be seen as creating a system of the 'metaphysical' kind. They are *functional* to Croce's antimetaphysical project which was to establish a method for history and the arts.

What I have tried to demonstrate in this section is that Croce's *Philosophy of the Spirit* should not be read as a holistic idealistic system. Rather, its different

components are theoretically *functional* 'modes' of analyzing different aspects of 'reality'. The *Estetica*, *Logica* and *Pratica* describe different postures which can be applied to the reading of history. This is a way of remaining faithful to Croce's repeated emphasis on the need to avoid constructing definitive metaphysical systems. But before exploring in detail the development of Croce's characteristic method of narrating his conception of history we need to clarify the frequently misinterpreted philosopher's position on the exact sciences.

### 3.3 THE ROLE OF THE SCIENCES

We have already noted that a factor which contributed to discrediting Croce's philosophy was his purported hostility towards scientific thought<sup>62</sup>. Indeed, to many critics Croce's alleged inability to understand the importance of the exact sciences represented his major flaw. The otherwise sympathetic Garin encapsulates the attitude of a long-established critique:

Quella che al Croce può sembrare 'una tranquilla rivoluzione filosofica', ossia il rifiuto del valore delle 'scienze', non solo non era rivoluzione, ma non era né filosofica, né tranquilla: era una risposta mistificante ai problemi reali, che finì coll'offrire facili formule alla pigrizia mentale<sup>63</sup>.

This harsh verdict on Croce, which saw in the philosopher the main intellectual obstacle to the development, in Italy, of a vigorous scientific perspective, has become commonplace, as we have seen in the first chapter.

One text in particular, namely the *Logica*, has been considered a paradigmatic example of Croce's opposition to the exact sciences. It must be conceded that there is, indisputably, a certain *rhetorical* antagonism<sup>64</sup> towards the method of science with its tendency to generalization. Croce saw in the method of the exact sciences a powerful tool for 'managing' reality, but he also saw the dangers of producing over-schematic frameworks of understanding when used in disciplines such as history and art.

However, talking about the purpose of his *Logica*, Croce had made clear that the book did not represent an attack on science but rather a reaffirmation of logic:

Quando questo libro fu per la prima volta pubblicato, parve a molti che esso fosse in guisa precipua una assai vivace requisitoria contro la

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<sup>62</sup> The Crocean Gembillo has rightly remarked that, 'quando si riferisce alle valutazioni espresse da Croce nei confronti delle scienze si tengono presenti quasi esclusivamente le considerazioni ... critiche che egli ha manifestato nei confronti del positivismo (cioè di una determinata concezione filosofica) ... mentre si tengono in poco conto i giudizi da lui espressi sugli scienziati e sulle scienze in quanto tali.' G. Gembillo, *Croce e il problema del metodo* (Naples: Flavio Pagano, 1991), p.7.

<sup>63</sup> E. Garin, 'Appunti sulla formazione del pensiero crociano', *Intellettuali italiani del XX secolo* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1974), p.24. See also Paolo Rossi: 'La tesi crociana della scienza come attività pratica e classificatrice, la negazione gentiliana dell'impossibilità di una storia della scienza, lasceranno, anche nel dopoguerra, tracce profonde.' P. Rossi, 'La storia della filosofia, il vecchio e il nuovo', *Rivista di filosofia*, 2-3 (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988), p.556.

<sup>64</sup> A scholar has appropriately drawn attention to Croce's style 'fondato sulla scissione e sul paradosso polemico.' E. Giammattei, *La Biblioteca e il Dragone. Croce, Gentile e la letteratura* (Naples: Editoriale Scientifica 2001), p.211.

Scienza; pochi vi scorsero ciò che soprattutto era: una *rivendicazione della serietà del pensiero logico*.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, a deeper level of analysis shows that his critique on the status of the exact sciences, far from being provincial, as many detractors of Croce have maintained,<sup>66</sup> was in tune with the general trend of Continental philosophy. Indeed, the philosophies of Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger, Husserl, to mention but a few, had all questioned the condition of science within the framework of philosophical speculation.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, the references to Bergson, Ernst Mach, Avenarius and Poincaré show that Croce was following fairly closely the contemporary debate on epistemology.<sup>68</sup> Thus, Croce's position has to be understood in the broader context of European thought.

It is true that in the *Logica* Croce made use of the infamous and unfortunate term 'pseudoconcetti', to distinguish concepts used in the sciences from those used in philosophy.<sup>69</sup> However, Croce simply aimed to stress the difference of method between the sciences and the humanities. It is important to stress once again that the differentiation that the philosopher made between the two disciplines was simply *methodological* and not *ontological* like that of the neo-Kantians. For Dilthey, for instance, the difference between the sciences of Nature and those of the Spirit was one of *essence* since the two 'sciences' were concerned with domains which were ontologically different. In Croce, on the other hand, it is the *method* which makes the

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<sup>65</sup> B. Croce, 'Per la terza edizione della *Logica*', in *La Critica*, III, (1917), pp.200-02,( p.200).

<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, Emilio Agazzi, 'Filosofia della prassi e filosofia dello spirito' in *La città futura* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1959), pp.2519-20.

<sup>67</sup> 'Croce established, differently from Hegel, a distinction between mathematical and empirical knowledge and philosophy attributing to them different contexts and functions. Their differences aside, Croce's *Logic* also had affinities with Husserl's *Philosophical investigations* and with Heidegger's early analysis on judgment.' R. Viti Cavaliere, 'Croce's theory of judgment' in D'Amico, Trafton and Verdicchio, *The legacy of Benedetto Croce*, p.99.

<sup>68</sup> See *Logica*, pp.326-329. Here Croce supports his instrumentalist view of the sciences with the theories of the above-mentioned epistemologists. Viano, however, does not seem to have read these pages, since he argues that 'Croce e Gentile accolsero in generale l'interpretazione pragmatistica della scienza, ma senza utilizzare le argomentazioni di filosofi pragmatisti e di scienziati come Poincaré e Mach: a loro premeva disfarsi della scienza.' C.A. Viano, 'Filosofia' in C. Staiano (ed.), *La cultura italiana del novecento* (Bari:Laterza, 1996), p.253.

<sup>69</sup> Myra Moss has justly remarked that: 'the Crocean sphere of the practical with its pseudoconcepts never held a lesser position in relation to the theoretic pure concepts. At times ... Croce used adjectives 'superior' and 'inferior' to express the phenomenological relations of dependency that held among the expressions of human spirit. He did not, however, mean that the pseudoconcepts were of inferior value than the pure ones. Instead he meant to describe the asymmetrical relations that held between theoretical and practical activity.' M. E. Moss, *Benedetto Croce reconsidered. Truth and Error in Theories of Art, Literature, and History* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1987), p.78.

exact sciences radically different from the humanities. Thus, there is a *methodological distinction* between the procedures of science and those of philosophy.

For Croce the common procedure of the exact sciences is to provide schemes in order to control a given process. Their purpose is therefore instrumental. Indeed, Croce talked about the ‘carattere *pratico o economico* delle scienze matematiche, fisiche e naturali’.<sup>70</sup> When we make use of ‘finzioni concettuali’ or ‘pseudoconcetti’ we do not question reality or values but look at general applicability. Here lies the crucial methodological difference between science and philosophy. Science is an instrumental form of knowledge, concerned with usefulness, philosophy, on the other hand, is a *critique of culture* and it involves values as well as judgements on reality. Science, in Croce, presents theories that develop our control of nature, it broadens the range of knowledge and widens the sphere of our practical life, it provides us with a greater and more penetrating insight into reality, but it is not reality. These are constructs, or hypotheses, on reality:

Le cosiddette scienze naturali ... calcolano, misurano, pongono eguaglianze, stabiliscono regolarità, foggiano classi e tipi, formano leggi, mostrano a loro modo come un fatto nasca da altri fatti: ma tutti i loro progressi urtano sempre in fatti che sono appresi intuitivamente e storicamente. Perfino la geometria afferma ora di riposare tutta su ipotesi, non essendo lo spazio tridimensionale o euclideo se non uno degli spazi possibili.<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, for Croce, we always operate using theories. In this sense every science is based on a ‘philosophy’. Pure observation, the famous objective perception, does not exist. All observations are made through the filter of a given theory.<sup>72</sup> Croce observed that the main assumption on which science is based is the uniformity of nature:

A fondamento delle leggi o concetti empirici sta il postulato della costanza o *uniformità della natura*. Ma ... quella costanza e uniformità che si postula è nient'altro che la stessa *opportunità pratica* onde si libera di trascurare le differenze ... Il postulato dell'uniformità della natura è la richiesta di una trattazione della realtà per ragioni di comodo<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>70</sup> Croce, *Logica*, p. 324.

<sup>71</sup> Croce, *Estetica*, p. 39.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Il procedere astrattivo, quantunque non modificabile filosoficamente, è *condizionato dalla filosofia*; e sono i pensieri che determinano l'uno o l'altro indirizzo in cui debbono eseguirsi le astrazioni.’ B. Croce, ‘Noterelle di critica hegeliana’, in *La Critica*, v (1912), pp. 370-81, (p.380).

<sup>73</sup> Croce, *Logica*, pp.200-01.

For Croce science neither creates values nor grounds the premises on which it is ultimately based, since these premises are the result of pre-established sets of theories which have to meet laboratory conditions. These theories are schematic 'abstractions' of our experience and are valid in so far as they provide a practical outcome. However, the use of abstractions, or hypothesis in science far from being derogatory to them is the *condicio sine qua non* for the physical sciences. From this point of view, there is no real conflict between science and philosophy but rather different methods of inquiry and aims.<sup>74</sup> The question of 'truth' in science is meaningless and should be replaced with 'suitability' or 'exactness'.<sup>75</sup>

We can fruitfully compare Croce's position with that of Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*:

A scientific theory is usually felt to be better than its predecessors not only in the sense that it is a better instrument for discovery and solving puzzles, but also because it is somehow of what nature is really like. One often hears that successive theories grow even closer to, or approximately more and more closely to, the truth. Apparently generalizations like that refer not to the puzzle-solutions and the concrete predictions derived from a theory, but rather to its ontology, to the match, that is, between the entities with which theory populates nature and what is 'really there'.<sup>76</sup>

Like Croce, Kuhn does not accept an ontological view of reality and remarks that the idea of 'what is "really there"' is misleading:

Besides, as an historian I am impressed with the implausibility of the view. I do not doubt, for example, that Newton's mechanics improves Aristotle's and that Einstein's improves on Newton's as instruments of puzzle-solving. But I can see in their succession no coherent direction of ontological improvement.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> L'antinomia, di cui molti parlano, tra scienza e filosofia, è un sogno'. Ibid., p.210.

<sup>75</sup> Renata Viti Cavaliere relates this distinction between 'exactness' and 'truth' to Hermeneutics: 'From a different position, Croce thought through the distinction between exactness and truth, which represents what is theoretically interesting, in the logical-theoretical investigations of this century taken as whole and which is still the dividing line between analytic philosophers and followers of Hermeneutics.' Viti Cavaliere, 'Croce's theory of historical judgment', p.99.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p.206.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

The similarities between Kuhn and Croce's argument are striking. Indeed, they both insist on the *instrumental* value of science and both rule out all ontological concerns about 'real nature' to concentrate on the usability of scientific paradigms.

It should be clear by now that Croce's polemic is on the *schematic procedure* of science which is not considered a suitable method for the humanities, which require a different approach. In order to know how we should live we do not need the schematic and abstract formulations of the exact sciences. Only a one-dimensional conception of knowledge would consider the method of the exact sciences the *only* form for comprehending reality. For Croce, the sciences are free from values, they do not consider them and this is their strength. Indeed, science is unable to provide values precisely because in this field the question of values is irrelevant.<sup>78</sup>

Croce's target is the blind transposition of the scientific method onto the 'sciences of the spirit', which creates 'abstract philosophies':

Il distacco che vi si compie della filosofia dalla scienza non è distacco da *ciò che nella scienza è verace conoscere* ... e perciò è, nel tempo stesso un ricongiungimento con quanto vi ha di vivo, di concreto e progressivo nelle cosiddette scienze. E se alla distruzione di qualcosa vi si mira, ciò non è chiaramente altro che la filosofia astratta.<sup>79</sup>

Science and the humanities have different purposes which are interrelated but nevertheless distinct. Indeed, it is a big mistake, for Croce,

concepire le scienze naturali, non solo la preparazione, ma addirittura il primo abbozzo ... del blocco di marmo che la filosofia ridurrà a statua. In questa concezione si sacrifica, senz'avvedersene, o l'autonomia delle scienze naturali o quella della filosofia; secondo che come unico metodo a volta a volta si ponga o quello filosofico o quello naturalistico.<sup>80</sup>

However, this methodological discrimination between humanities and the exact sciences does not imply incommensurability between the two:

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<sup>78</sup>'Nelle scienze lo scopo prevalente è quello dell'*utilità* al quale viene sottomesso ogni altro scopo (bellezza, verità, etica, ecc.) mentre nella filosofia-storia lo scopo prevalente è la *verità* che sussume e strumentalizza ogni altro.' R. Franchini, *La teoria della storia di Benedetto Croce* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1988), p. 70.

<sup>79</sup>Croce, 'Per la terza edizione', p.200.

<sup>80</sup> Croce, *Logica*, p.211.

L'autonomia delle scienze che qui si proclama e loro legittima persistenza accanto, o meglio, oltre la filosofia ... viene anche fraintesa come un'asserzione della vita separata della filosofia e delle scienze, l'una e le altre tra loro indifferenti. Ma, quando si parla di autonomia delle scienze ... non si vuole affermare altro se non che le scienze rappresentano il momento ... *praticamente necessario* allo spirito umano.<sup>81</sup>

On the one hand philosophy provides a series of critical reflections on the procedures of the sciences, focusing on the historical, ideological, and cultural dimensions on which the latter are based; on the other hand the schematic procedures of the sciences are an essential component for a *coherent classification* of knowledge and have to be used in disciplines like linguistics and philology:

Le scienze naturalistiche del linguaggio e dell'arte, della morale, del diritto, dell'economia ... non sono semplicemente il cosiddetto *stadio empirico* delle corrispondenti discipline filosofiche, ma persistono e persisteranno sempre accanto alle filosofiche perché rendono servizi non surrogabili. Non c'è filosofia del linguaggio, dell'arte, che possa scacciare dal seggio che loro spetta ... la grammatica, la fonetica, la morfologia, la sintassi, la metrica, con le loro categorie empiriche ... o che sia in grado eliminare le classificazioni dei generi artistici o letterari.<sup>82</sup>

Far from displaying hostility to the natural sciences, Croce here shows their usefulness, even necessity, in the pursuit of the humanities. Hence, his epistemological distinction preserves the autonomy of both disciplines allowing science to operate on 'abstract' models and philosophy to inquire on the nature and theories behind them.<sup>83</sup>

What remained important to Croce, however, was that the humanities should not be totally reduced to *nothing but* science or its discourses. In other words, humanistic disciplines can never be reduced to purely pragmatic concerns. Indeed, Croce observed that all attempts to transpose the scientific method to the humanities

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<sup>81</sup> Croce, 'Noterelle', p. 380. Italics mine.

<sup>82</sup> Croce, *Logica*, p.212.

<sup>83</sup> Francesco Barone ignored the *caution* with which Croce discussed the role of the sciences within the humanities and maintained that 'Ciò che non convince dell'epistemologia crociana è soprattutto la messa al bando della verità dall'ambito della scienza, e in genere la netta contrapposizione tra la categoria dell'utile e quella del vero. In realtà ... le due categorie non sono esclusive l'una dell'altra.' F. Barone, 'Croce e la scienza', *Mondoperaio*, 11 (1982), pp. 77-83 (p.77).



had ended up in their impoverishment.<sup>84</sup> In reality, what was lost in this operation of reductionism was *precisely* the peculiar understanding of the humanities; subjects like history, literature and the arts in general had to be dealt with by different methods.

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<sup>84</sup>‘L’ultimo cospicuo esempio storico di empirismo, quello che da Augusto Comte prese il nome di *positivismo*, professò chiaramente il disegno di ridurre la filosofia a nient’altro che a una classificazione, la quale ... sarebbe andata ... dall’astratto via via al meno astratto, senza mai per altro attingere il concreto. Il positivismo pareva non avvedersi che i fatti, sui quali pretendeva di lavorare ... erano già *determinazioni filosofiche*, e solo in virtù della filosofia potevano essere ammessi come fatti *positivi*’. Croce, *Logica* p. 242.

### 3.4 NARRATION, LOGIC AND HISTORY

It has already been suggested that Croce's division into 'modes' (aesthetic, logical, economic and ethical) can be viewed as an epistemological endeavour to be open to history in its complexity, in its multifaceted levels and manifestations. Here history is sometimes considered as an object (in the form of historical events perceived by the historian) or as a narrative (historiography). Thus, Crocean epistemology applies to both the historical events and its narrative.

The conversion of history into historical narrative required a sophisticated apparatus, and the fourfold division into 'modes' had its *raison d'être* in explaining and articulating both history itself and the historical narrative in a non-reductive way or, to use Croce's terminology, with an antimetaphysical method. It is important to underline once again that Croce's aim was to devise an *open epistemology of history*, not a metaphysics of historical 'reality'. In this respect the emphasis on historicism as the ultimate truth has been as misleading as the strictly idealistic reading of Croce's thought.<sup>85</sup> There are, of course, blind spots in Croce's philosophical undertaking, particularly when, writing the *Estetica, Logica* and *Pratica*, he 'borrowed' some terms from the idealistic tradition. However, deeper analysis reveals that the philosopher was mainly concerned with a liberation of history from metaphysics.

In his first characterization of historical narrative, the dissertation of 1893, Croce had focused on its *rhetorical* side, classifying history as an art and focusing on the intrinsic subjectivity of all historical accounts. After reading Marx the 'ideological' element in history began to emerge. The 'historical emplotment', to use Hayden White's term, was not only driven by rhetoric but also by 'interest', or rather groups of 'interests' which produced in turn different kinds of historiography. However, at this stage, Croce was still lacking the appropriate epistemic framework into which he could fit these important reflections.

The solution to which Croce came was the epistemic division into 'modes' of philosophy first sketched in the *Estetica*. Croce had realized by now that history and historiography could not be reduced to any of these 'modes', but that it was the result of their combination. His subsequent works would concentrate on these different

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<sup>85</sup> Much as I admire David D. Roberts' work I cannot agree with his view when he maintains that 'Croce was audacious enough to identify history with God. History in other words, is the ultimate reality, or absolute.' Roberts, *Benedetto Croce*, p.181. We will see that Croce's 'storicismo assoluto' does not imply the reduction of all cultural manifestations to history. Instead, it refers to the historical component present in culture.

'modes'. However, we should not forget that the distinction into 'modes' was accompanied, corroborated, and corrected by a series of original and specific studies on history and literary criticism. These studies raised important theoretical questions relating to the nature of history and art and, despite the opinion of many interpreters, they do not form an a comprehensive system of thought but rather a series of 'incursions' into the theory of specific disciplines as Croce made clear in 1915:

Quando, terminato che ebbi di pubblicare la *Filosofia dello Spirito*, molti m'invitavano al riposo, perchè (dicevano) avevo compiuto il mio 'sistema', io sapevo che *in realtà non avevo compiuto né chiuso nulla*, ma solamente scritto alcuni volumi intorno ai problemi accumulatisi ... sin dagli anni della giovinezza.<sup>86</sup>

This does not imply, of course, that Croce did not possess a clear sense of the aims and purpose of his research; it simply reveals that the philosopher did not have a pre-conceived path to follow. In this sense, Croce's alleged idealism can be considered *functional*. Moreover, in this view, the *Filosofia dello Spirito* ceases to be the rock upon which the 'Crocean system' was built and becomes rather the springboard for further research and 'svolgimenti'.

In the *Estetica* Croce's main concern was to establish the importance of art and find a method for literary criticism, hence the references to history and historiography are rather scant. Nevertheless, we can find some essential developments on the *nature of narrative* in history and the work of the historian. Here the historical account is not conceived of as a naïve collection of 'facts' or 'causes' but rather an articulate 'narration' of the past:

Chiunque non sia semplice raccoglitore di fatti slegati, mero ricercatore, o incoerente cronista, non può non mettere insieme la più piccola *narrazione* di fatti umani se non possiede un suo criterio determinato, un proprio convincimento circa il concetto dei fatti di cui assume di *narrare* la storia. Dall'ammasso confuso e discordante dei fatti bruti non si sale all'opera d'arte storica se non mercé quest'appercezione, che rende possibile ritagliare in quella mole rude e indigesta una rappresentazione pensata.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Croce, *Contributo*, p.65. Italics mine.

<sup>87</sup> Croce, *Estetica*, p. 169. Italics mine.

The 'rappresentazione pensata' here indicated the use of a *rhetorical* level and a *logical* one in narrating history. The nature of this logical level was still to be specified, but Croce's emphasis was on the imaginative and narrative constraints to which history, as a form of realistic depiction, is subject.

Furthermore, Croce reiterated the importance of subjectivity in the historical account and the absurdity of the notion of a 'pure historian':

Non possiamo estenderci nel dimostrare la necessità e l'indefettibilità di questo *criterio soggettivo* ... in ogni narrazione delle opere e vicende umane. Basta leggere un qualsiasi libro di storia per scoprire subito il pensiero dell'autore, se questi è tale che sia degno del nome di storico e conosca l'arte sua. Vi sono storici liberali e storici reazionari, razionalisti e cattolici, per ciò che riguarda la storia politica e sociale; storici metafisici, empiristi, scettici, idealisti, spiritualisti, per quanto riguarda la storia della filosofia: storici puramente storici non ve ne sono e non ve ne possono essere<sup>88</sup>.

The new element introduced by Croce with respect to 'subjectivity' treated in the 1893 dissertation is its *ideological nature* which is recognized as a fundamental part of historical narration. The empirical-analytical approach to history did not take into account the great importance of these elements in historiography. However, for Croce, historians are not scientists, in the sense of providing definitive certainties or formulas. Historiography itself, for Croce, is a continuous reassessment of the past in the light of the present. It is clear at this stage that in Croce the emphasis was on the construction of the *narrative* of history rather than on the documents, the 'hard evidence' of the historian-scientist. This, does not, for Croce, diminish the importance, in general terms, of historical validation.<sup>89</sup>

In his famous critique of the philosophy of Hegel, *Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto della filosofia di Hegel*, published in 1906, Croce, criticizing the panlogism of the German philosopher's conception of history, returned to this point:

La storia diversamente dall'arte presuppone il pensiero filosofico quale sua condizione; ma come l'arte ha il suo materiale nell'elemento

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., pp.169-70.

<sup>89</sup> See Croce, *Teoria e storia*: 'parlare di una storia, della quale non si posseggano i documenti, sembrerà tanto stravagante quanto parlare dell'esistenza di una cosa qualsiasi, della quale si afferma insieme che manca una delle condizioni essenziali della sua esistenza ... Una storia senza relazione con il documento sarebbe una storia inverificabile.' p.6.

intuitivo. *Perciò la storia è sempre narrazione e non mai teoria o sistema.*<sup>90</sup>

Indeed, for Croce, if we have a preconceived scheme of history we end up with a philosophy of history, which is ‘il disconoscimento della storiografia a beneficio dell’astratta filosofia.’<sup>91</sup> This is the main flaw of Hegel’s philosophy:

Hegel doveva porre, e pose, l’idea di una filosofia della storia ... Che questa storiografia filosofica debba avere metodo proprio, diverso dal metodo della storiografia ordinaria, Hegel afferma rivendicandole il carattere di costruzione *a priori*. Senonchè l’*a priori* ... è ... una storia bell’e compiuta che ha bisogno soltanto di essere rivestita di nomi e date.<sup>92</sup>

The ‘living part’ of Hegel’s philosophy was, for Croce, the discovery of dialectic as a form of logic which, divested of any form of teleology, could be fruitfully applied to historiography. Indeed, in Croce, logic consisted in exploring the sense of the four ‘modes’, or levels, defining the historical process leaving aside any eschatology or final synthesis, whereas in Hegel logic became the movement which replaces reality with a pre-determined scheme of history. Thus, ‘Hegel prima di cercare la realtà di fatto sa già quale questa deve essere.’<sup>93</sup> We will see that Croce’s antimetaphysical attitude towards ‘historical systems’ and the consequences for the historical narration would have more radical developments in *Teoria e Storia della Storiografia* (1915).

The nature of the *logical* ‘mode’ was thoroughly explored by Croce in the *Logica* (1909, definitive edition):

Senza l’elemento logico, non è possibile nemmeno affermare che il più piccolo, il più volgare caso, pertinente alla nostra vita individuale è *accaduto*: che io mi sono levato stamane alle otto o che ho fatto colazione alle dodici, perchè (per non dir altro) queste proposizioni storiche importano il concetto dell’esistenza o effettualità, e l’altro correlativo della inesistenza o possibilità, onde nell’affermarle si nega insieme che io abbia solamente sognato di levarmi alle otto o di far colazione alle dodici.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Croce, *Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto*, p.89. Italics mine.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.91.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p.93.

<sup>94</sup> Croce, *Logica*, p. 182.

The main notion in the *Logica*, however, is that concerning the *formal identity* between philosophical and historical judgements.<sup>95</sup> Here Croce aimed to provide the epistemological foundations for understanding history and historiography which, he believed, were different from those of the physical and natural sciences. Whenever we make use of a concept, Croce maintained, we use it within the historical framework in which this concept is created:

La domanda, il problema, il dubbio è sempre individualmente condizionato: ... il dubbio di un tedesco dell'anno 1800 non è quello di un tedesco dell'anno 1900.<sup>96</sup>

Understanding a concept in its full meaning implies a knowledge of the cultural and social structures in which it has its roots. It is therefore important to understand that the concepts and categories with which we think are not eternal forms of understanding separated from our daily experience, but on the contrary they are informed by our historical condition. This is a crucial difference between Kant and Croce. Indeed, in the German philosopher basic concepts and categories are entirely *a priori*, independent of history and experience, whereas with Croce they are created in a given time, society and culture:

In effetto, una proposizione filosofica o definizione ... nasce dalla mente di un determinato individuo, in un determinato punto del tempo e dello spazio e tra *condizioni determinate*; ed è perciò sempre *storicamente condizionata*. Senza le condizioni storiche che pongono la domanda un sistema non sarebbe quello che è. La filosofia kantiana non si poteva avere al tempo di Pericle, perchè presuppone, per non dir altro, la scienza esatta della natura, svoltasi dal Rinascimento in poi, come questa le scoperte geografiche, l'industria, la civiltà capitalistica o borghese, e via discorrendo: e presuppone ancora, lo scetticismo di Davide Hume, il quale a sua volta presuppone il deismo dei principî del secolo ottavo, che a sua volta rimanda alle lotte religiose dei secoli decimosesto e decimo settimo.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> It is important to stress that Croce did not intend to reduce philosophy to history. Indeed, he maintained that, 'Affermare l'eterna natura storica di ogni filosofia ... e imporre al filosofo "di scrivere (materialmente) libri di storia", mi pare che siano due cose diverse, e la seconda puerile.' In other words Croce intended to deny 'un concetto di filosofia che sia mero sforzo verso l'universale astratto: proposizione religiosa, questa, ma non critica.' B. Croce, 'Che cos'è la filosofia?', *La Critica*, n. iii, (1922), pp. 125-28 (p.127).

<sup>96</sup> Croce, *Logica*, p.127.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p.184. Italics mine. This is not to deny the statements in section 3.2 that to Croce 'intuition' was an 'a priori' mode of cognition. The point that is being made is in relation to the *content* of basic notions, even of space and time, which Croce was more inclined to accept as historically conditioned.

Croce rejected all absolutes. In this respect, classic idealism and empiricism were both impracticable for providing a correct understanding of the historical process. The knowledge we possess, the concepts we utilize, cannot be elucidated either as mere reflections of the external world, nor as rising above experience. Instead, Croce suggested, it is history, namely the society, culture, the totality of practices and customs of a given period, which sustain and form our concepts and make it possible to use them. For Croce, when a philosophy fails to deliver an understanding of this historical reality it becomes ‘senza applicazione’ or ‘infeconda’:

C'è una pietra di paragone, ossia può indicarsi un segno esterno, un indizio che aiuti a far riconoscere l'indirizzo filosofico schietto e valido, tra i molti spurii e inconcludenti. Questa pietra di paragone è la Storia. Perché ogni storia ha per suo presupposto e condizione il pensiero filosofico. Ogni filosofia deve sboccare nella storia, cioè dar l'intelligenza della realtà concreta e viva, la quale è e non può non essere, realtà storica. Quando una filosofia rimane staccata dai fatti, indifferente ad essi, impotente a dominarli, o come comunemente si dice senza applicazione; è da sospettare, con buon fondamento, che quella filosofia abbia un grosso difetto d'origine, cagione di quella infertilità.<sup>98</sup>

With the definition of concepts as *historical formations*, Croce aimed to avoid a purely speculative conception of philosophy remote from the problems of the present, and insisted that

bisogna conoscere il significato dei problemi del proprio tempo; il che importa conoscere anche quelli del passato per non scambiare gli uni con gli altri e dar luogo ad un'impervia confusione.<sup>99</sup>

This ‘hermeneutical’ operation, in Croce, involved taking all disciplines as historical formations. Thus,

bisognerà conoscere anche le scienze naturali, fisiche, matematiche ... *in quanto conoscenze storiche* circa lo stato delle scienze naturali, della fisica, della matematica, per intendere i problemi filosofici che concorrono a suscitare.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Croce, ‘La pietra di paragone delle filosofie’, *La Critica*, i, (1908), pp. 155-57. (p.155).

<sup>99</sup> B. Croce, *Logica*, p.186.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

However, the formal identity between historical and philosophical judgements did not simply mean that there is no understanding of facts or experiences without the necessary historical foundations. Croce's proposal was meant to demonstrate an identity between the *defining* of any judgement and its *historical* elucidation. For Croce, all judgements are ontologically historical.<sup>101</sup> Above all, this identity implied a firm rejection of 'timeless philosophies'. Indeed, whenever we make a judgement, for Croce, this judgement communicates *in concrete* the 'logic', or rationale, of the world in which it is expressed. In this sense it can be defined as historical. Our *present* aesthetic, analytical, economic and ethical references form the framework in which judgments are articulated. We can say that the logic we use to judge *now* relies on the current concepts and categories which are linked to our cultural and social interactions in the present. The interdependence between theory and history, ideas and facts implies a theory of knowledge in which both aspects are taken into account.

The acknowledgment of a logic *relative* to a certain period of time was in sharp contrast with the neo-Kantian conception of changeless 'patterns' forming the structure of our understanding. Conversely, for Croce, the concepts we employ can be explained in their full meaning only if they are related to their historical context. Thus,

l'eternità di ogni proposizione filosofica ... è da negare quando si intenda come fantastico isolamento dalle condizioni storiche, e affermare bisogna invece la relatività di ogni filosofia.<sup>102</sup>

Since *concepts* and *historical context* are interrelated we cannot isolate only one aspect. We need to understand the concept in its relation to the historical context in which it was created. Indeed, it is in the historical paradigm with its 'modes' that we can find the elements to analyze a given period. Moreover, for Croce, a historical period, a thought, a new tradition, is always *reacting* to its historical or ideologically constructed predecessor. Historicity and dialectic are the main structural features of

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<sup>101</sup>Croce rejected the Kantian distinction between analytical and synthetic judgements maintaining that analytical judgements (mathematical operations and so forth) do not supply us knowledge but control over reality. They are both useful and indispensable tools. However, 'i giudizi di valore, in quanto veramente giudizi, coincidono coi giudizi individuali o storici'. Croce, *Logica*, p. 338. Croce's distinction between pure and empirical concepts (or 'pseudoconcetti') aimed to stress the difference between 'historical' judgements, which give us a deeper knowledge of reality, and procedures such as mathematical operations which have an instrumental purpose in the investigation.

<sup>102</sup> Croce, *Logica*, p.189.



the concepts we use. The four 'modes' are an essential tool for discriminating and therefore understanding the various strands of the historical process. If, for instance, we are examining slavery in ancient Greece we need to know what were the categories through which the idea, or concept, of slavery was thought. In other words, the historian has to investigate the rhetorical, the rational, the practical and the ethical drives behind the emergence of this concept, focussing also on the *polemical intentions* that all discourses reveal. Years later, in *Il carattere della filosofia moderna*, Croce specified:

La prima regola per interpretare una proposizione filosofica è di domandarsi contro chi o contro che cosa polemicamente si rivolga, e quale 'angoscia' ha superata o si è sforzata di superare. Fuori di questa seria interpretazione storica, anche le teorie dei filosofi prendono, al pari dei sistemi delle metafisiche, aspetto di una sequela di asserzioni vacue e senza significato e l'una e l'altra contrastanti ... e lo scetticismo si asside nel cumulo delle sue rovine, ridendo del suo riso insulso.<sup>103</sup>

It should be clear, by now, that when Croce used the term 'concept' he did not refer to a kind of transcendent component of understanding. Croce did not assume a pre-existing ideal reality, a universal model for individual and society. On the contrary he made clear that

ogni concetto non esiste altrimenti che in quanto è pensato e chiuso in parole, ossia in quanto è definito, e, se le definizioni variano anche il concetto varia.<sup>104</sup>

However, the historical flexibility of concepts does not jeopardize their heuristic value since

ammessa la condizionalità individuale e storica di ogni pensiero del concetto ossia di ogni definizione (condizionalità donde si origina il dubbio, problema, la domanda a cui la definizione risponde) si deve ammettere altresì che la definizione, la quale contiene la risposta e afferma il concetto, nel fare ciò illumina sempre quella condizionalità individuale e storica, quel gruppo di fatti da cui essa sorge.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Croce, *Il carattere*, p.22.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p.127.

<sup>105</sup> Croce, *Logica*, p.128.

Croce maintained that concepts cannot totally encapsulate the complexity of history, they rather guide us through its maze of interpretations. Hence, concepts represent the indispensable tools through which history is interpreted. Moreover, the distinction between pure and empirical concepts allowed Croce to distinguish two different functions relating to our understanding, one evaluative-normative<sup>106</sup> and the other distinctively practical. In other words, within the realm of concepts we can differentiate one set concerned with norms and values from another set connected with practice (in Crocean terms: *concetti puri* and *pseudoconcetti*). The first group of concepts can be considered the theoretical and ethical kernel of the historical interpretation, the second the analytical – empirical component. Consequently the ‘concetti puri’ form our normative and ethical views whereas the ‘pseudoconcetti’ freeze them in an epistemological structure. Thus, the fluidity of the relation between norms, values and practices reflects that of thought and action.

The broader consequences of this conception would appear in the later developments of Croce’s thought. However, at this stage, it is fundamental to distinguish between Croce’s insight on the connection between logic and history and the misleading connections some contemporary critics have made between 19<sup>th</sup> century historicism and that of Croce.<sup>107</sup>

In the *Logica* Croce made the historical dimension the central concern of philosophical thought. Indeed, for Croce, it is in constant dialogue with the past evoked in the present that one finds the rationale of the historical account. If, on the one hand, this notion reiterated Croce’s firm refutation of all metaphysical views, on the other hand it rejected the shifting sands of philosophical skepticism. In reality, the historization of concepts did not deny the possibility of knowledge; it simply denied the conception of an ultimate and eternal Truth to which our intellectual endeavors have to conform. In *Contributo alla critica di me stesso* Croce maintained:

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<sup>106</sup> In the distinction Croce made between ‘pure concepts’ and ‘pseudoconcepts’, the former do not consist simply of theoretical judgements but include the value-laden components of cognition (the ‘morale’ and the ‘bello’).

<sup>107</sup> Pietro Rossi is perhaps the most illustrious contemporary exponent of the opposite view: ‘Ricandidata nell’ambito della “filosofia dello spirito” la teoria crociana della storiografia si fonda su una concezione della storia di derivazione hegeliana ... la logica della storia diventa, in tal modo, una logica provvidenzialistica e assume la funzione di teodicea.’ P. Rossi, ‘Croce e la storia’, *Mondoperaio*, 35 (1982), pp. 109-15 (p. 109). See also Rossi’s section ‘Benedetto Croce e lo storicismo assoluto in *Storia e storicismo nella filosofia contemporanea* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1991), pp.222-61.

La verità non si lascia legare una volta per tutte ... Posto il concetto di una verità extrastorica, lo scetticismo è inevitabile e invincibile.<sup>108</sup>

History is central in Croce because it is never written definitively. It is in the constant dialogue with the past that one finds the reasons for facing and building the future. However, Croce's position was not a relativist one as some critics have claimed.<sup>109</sup> If one understands his notion correctly one finds that the relativity of views as history develops is a resource and not a problem. The real problem, for Croce, was rather the 'perfect' account of history, the obsession

di *ridurre la storia a scienza* .. cioè di fare ch'essa sia in modo perfetto quello che ora sarebbe solo in modo imperfetto: *classificazione e statistica* della realtà.<sup>110</sup>

This would lead to an unacceptable form of determinism which would ossify history into a sort of schematized account of the past, 'sostituendo alla narrazione individual l'esibizione di pallidi schemi e vuote astrazioni, che si adattano a tutte o parecchie età insieme.'<sup>111</sup>

Moreover, the 'scientific selection' based on pre-conceived and timeless schemes to be applied to all ages encourages the pernicious distinction between 'relevant' and 'irrelevant' facts in history:

Si è anche affermata ... l'importanza della distinzione tra avvenimenti storici e avvenimenti non degni di storia, personaggi storici e non storici ... Ma non è da credere che ... quegli individui e avvenimenti vengano soppressi, non diciamo nel campo della realtà (che sarebbe troppo manifestamente assurdo) ma in quello del *racconto della realtà* ... Così abbiamo veduto la vita domestica e sociale trascurata dai vecchi storici, non solo acquistare a poco a poco rilievo, ma gettare nell'ombra le guerre e i negoziati diplomatici; le cosiddette 'masse', trascurate a pro dell'individuo geniale, riavanzarsi facendo quasi sparire nel loro ampio grembo gli eroi ... Esempi di codeste fluttuazioni offre anche la recente storiografia italiana, che nel periodo del Risorgimento giudicò sommamente importanti, e per eccellenza storici, la formazione delle nazionalità, il costituirsi delle borghesie e

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<sup>108</sup> Croce, *Contributo*, pp. 61 and 63.

<sup>109</sup> See M. Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge: an Answer to Relativism* (New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 1938), pp. 17-82 and 166-74. Mandelbaum considers Croce, along with Dilthey and Manheim, a relativist. The extent to which Croce's views can be considered relativist will be discussed in depth in chapter five.

<sup>110</sup> Croce, *Logica*, p. 181.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

dei comuni, le ribellioni delle popolazioni contro gli stranieri o contro i tiranni; e, ora, sotto l'efficacia del moto socialistico, si è volta di preferenza ai fatti economici, alle lotte di classe, alle ribellioni proletarie.<sup>112</sup>

All 'grand discourses' in other words, are ultimately reductionist. Judgements about the relevance or irrelevance of facts, Croce would specify later, are dictated by the 'spiritual interests' of an epoch, namely by the relation of the present with past.

Our analysis of Croce's epistemology of history has taken us to the core of his *antimetaphysical method*. We have shown that the received perception of the 'filosofia dello spirito' as a grandiose project is misconceived and that it should, instead, be interpreted as an epistemic tool to be applied to historical narrative. Indeed, the philosopher's division into 'modes' was the heuristic device that he employed to avoid reductionism in historiography.

We have also seen that for Croce history is an *open process* to be narrated through historiography. Historiography itself was not a simple process for Croce, but the result of a rigorous critique of the devices through which it is expressed. Thus we cannot agree with Roberts who maintains that 'Croce was vague about the mechanism of interaction between the questioning historian and the particular chunk of historical reality that his answers illuminate'.<sup>113</sup> Nor can we agree that Croce did not say much about historical narrative. Narrative was so central in Croce's reflections on history that it was the problem which triggered his early dissertation and led him to devise a non-reductive epistemological approach to historiography.<sup>114</sup> In effect, Croce's philosophy was an attempt to offer more suitable narratives for the complexity of 'reality'.

We approach the external world with a historical baggage which is 'spiritual', namely a cultural construction which has been handed down to us throughout time. Whenever we attempt a historical narrative we need to take into account the various 'modes' in which the culture of the period under scrutiny is transmitted. In order to make a meaningful account we need to explore the reception of these 'modes' in the period. This exploration does not occur through a kind of uncanny empathy or

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p.182.

<sup>113</sup> Roberts, *Benedetto Croce*, p.160.

<sup>114</sup> 'While R.G. Collingwood and others talked about "complex stories", Croce seemed to imply that everything on this level was self-evident, even that the historian relies simply on linear narrative which is itself unproblematic.' Ibid, p.162.

*Erlebnis* with the chosen historical time as in Dilthey and the Neo-Kantians: the historicism which requires the historian to divest himself of the culture of his age is engaging in a fiction, since the manner of any attempt to do so would be governed by the very framework of the culture which enables any historian to think at all. Our reflections on history are necessarily conducted through a continuous critical assessment of the past in the light of the cultural (Croce would use the word 'spiritual') needs of the present. We already know that these 'needs' are not, for Croce, only of an economic nature, but also aesthetic, logical and ethical. History, in its double aspect of *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*, needs to be understood in its complexity.

*The philosophy of the spirit was not an attempt to create an idealist system of interpretation.* To treat Croce's 'trilogy' in this way is to ignore his repeated assertions to the contrary about his intentions. It is, in effect, to see his enterprise as the creation of a metaphysics which he never tired of denouncing.

Another aspect of Croce's antimetaphysical stance was his methodological defiance of attempts to deal with transcendental issues. Philosophy does not deal with 'eternal truths' but accepts that the very fabric of our concepts is in constant historical flux.

Moreover, the acknowledgement of the historical value of concepts brought Croce to devise an epistemology in which exact sciences play an instrumental role, namely they are concerned with *effectiveness* more than *truth*. Nevertheless exact sciences play a crucial role in historiography. We have also seen that his position on the sciences, far from being a relic of nineteenth century thought, as many detractors of Croce maintain, was, in reality, in tune with the main developments of contemporary science. *Teoria e Storia della Storiografia* and *La Storia come pensiero e come azione* would go on to clarify the practical implications of these ideas and of the other components of Croce's antimetaphysical posture we have so far introduced.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### BREAKING THROUGH THE 'SYSTEM'

#### 4.1 DEVELOPMENTS IN CROCE'S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

(1915 – 1925)

The aim of this section is to provide a brief description of Croce's intellectual life during the years between the beginning of the Great War and the advent of Fascism in Italy and slightly beyond. The analysis of this decade is crucial to an understanding of the developments of Croce's theory of history in the light of the dramatic events which completely changed the political and intellectual map of Europe. In this context the philosopher had to face new questions which forced him to develop and partly reorientate his reflections on history and historiography.

The period from 1915 to 1925 is characterized by an 'approfondimento' of the practical side of historiography, namely its relation to ethics, politics and power. This is generally known as the ethico-political phase of Croce. Both the ethical and political elements became essential for the construction of historical narrative. Croce insisted on the interdependence of ethics and politics although he carefully distinguished their spheres of application. Within the ethico-political perspective history assumed a more *pragmatic dimension*, namely it was not simply confined to the field of pure speculation but historiography had to confront the world of which it became interpreter. In this period, as Stuart Hughes put it, in Croce 'activity and theory, history writing and philosophical elaboration, were inextricably entangled'.<sup>1</sup>

The year 1915 marked a decisive phase in Croce's thought. He felt the need to stop and think about his intellectual career as historian and literary critic as well as 'philosopher'. The result was an open intellectual autobiography, *Contributo alla critica di me stesso* which represented in the author's own words 'una sorta di "liquidazione del passato"'.<sup>2</sup> We have already seen that Croce's private life had been deeply affected by the death of his twenty-year partner in 1912. In 1914 he married Adele Rossi, a high school teacher from Turin. 1915 also marked Italy's entry into the Great War, when, 'cominciò a farsi chiaro che con la guerra europea si era entrati in una nuova epoca storica.'<sup>3</sup> This 'new historical epoch', despite the common view

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, p. 215.

<sup>2</sup> Croce, *Contributo*, p.69.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

which sees Croce isolated in a sort of fatalistic aloofness, was lived by the philosopher in great trepidation. If we browse through his correspondence we can see the apprehension with which the philosopher followed the dramatic events. In a letter to Prezzolini, for instance, Croce wrote:

Non mi unirò a coloro che confondono i loro vecchi odii giolittiani col problema gravissimo delle decisioni che l'Italia sta per prendere ... Se si decide la guerra, sarò tra quei molti italiani che appresteranno il loro animo alla nuova situazione e faranno quello che potranno. Ma non vorrei rimproverarmi di aver aiutato a provocarla.<sup>4</sup>

Another insight into Croce's feelings during this turbulent period comes from a letter to his friend Andrea Torre:

Tutto il mondo sul quale e col quale ho lavorato vacilla e minaccia di crollare ... la mente è paralizzata, il cuore contratto.<sup>5</sup>

These words do not match the picture of Olympian philosopher whose theory of history was supposed to transcend 'the moral and political horizons of the individuals.'<sup>6</sup> Croce felt very deeply the responsibilities of the man of culture and the Italian citizen. This was the reason why he was not prepared to confuse the two levels. Hence, we cannot maintain with Gramsci, Bobbio, and other interpreters that Croce's attitude towards the war was a detached one. His neutralist position was dictated by a genuine concern for the fate of his country. In his private correspondence we find him stating:

Non è lecito lasciar correre e credere alle favole circa la barbarie germanica, perchè le favole non giovano allo spirito di un popolo ... Non è ... lecito neppure seguire gli impulsi dei socialisti rivoluzionari o dei repubblicani che vogliono una Guerra con l'Austria non per ragioni nazionali ma per fare la rivoluzione in Italia.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Letter dated 16<sup>th</sup> May 1915, in Croce, *Epistolario I*, p.5.

<sup>5</sup> Croce, *Epistolario I*, letter to Andrea Torre 8<sup>th</sup> November 1917, p.17. See also the letter to Professor Vitello dated 25<sup>th</sup> November 1915: 'La leggenda della mia impassibilità è una leggenda. Io procuro di non perdere la testa: ecco tutto. E nondimeno ciò mi è costato e mi costa sforzi dolororosi.' Ibid., p.18.

<sup>6</sup> G. Bedani, 'The anti-populist politics of Croce's religione della libertà', *Italian Studies*, 35 (1980), pp. 81-97, (p.81)

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Professor Henry Bigot, 25<sup>th</sup> December 1914, Croce, *Epistolario I*, p.3.

We already know that Croce had held a neutralist position and was now increasingly concerned about the rising nationalism, and the hostility towards the Germans. From the pages of *La Critica* and other periodicals, such as *Il Giornale d'Italia* and *L'Unità*, Croce began to 'combattere l'aizzamento dei popoli l'uno contro l'altro' in an attempt to calm the overheated Italian public opinion. In 'L'entrata in guerra e il dovere degli studiosi', published in May 1915, Croce reported:

Storcere la verità e improvvisare dottrine ... non sono servigi resi alla patria, ma disdoro recato alla patria che deve contare sulla *serietà* dei suoi scienziati ... Lo scienziato non deve entrare in gara con le passioni, quando sono intente all'opera loro di creare fantasmi di amore e di odio.<sup>8</sup>

Croce's main concern, during this critical time, was to distinguish political propaganda from culture in opposition to a nationalist fever which tended to merge the two:

Abbiamo ... adempiuto altrove, come potevamo, l'ufficio di cittadini, propugnando tesi politiche e rendendo quei servigi che credevamo di poter rendere; e forse, altrove, più volte, ci siamo lasciati andare anche noi alle immaginazioni, e perfino al chiacchierare; ma ci siamo ben guardati di fare di questa rivista, consacrata alla scienza, la tribuna del nostro patriottismo.<sup>9</sup>

We have already described how the frenzied responses to the war, from both the nationalist front and the majority of the socialists, was perceived by Croce as a worrying sign of intellectual disorientation which could lead to ruinous outcomes. The rising nationalism, which tended to blow the history and the role of Italy in the European continent out of proportion, was harshly criticized by Croce from the pages of *La Critica* and other papers. To the *myth* of an Italian state which harked back to Roman glory the philosopher opposed the *history* of a young nation with a very short liberal-democratic life:

In modo contrario ai pregiudizi e alle parole tradizionali della storiografia corrente, e tuttavia in modo non discordante dalla comune

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<sup>8</sup> Croce, *Pagine sulla guerra*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55. Hughes has justly remarked that Croce 'strove to maintain intact the idea of an international community of scholars and to combat the tendency among the intellectuals of the warring nations to fall prey to the passion of the masses.' Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, p.214.



coscienza, ... la storia della nostra Italia è una storia non antica e secolare, ma recente, non strepitosa, ma modesta, non radiosa ma stentata.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the philosopher was aware of the critical phase that the fragile Italian democracy was going through. Despite the pervasive propaganda, Italy's political weight on the European continent could not be compared to that of Germany, France, or Britain. Nationalist rhetoric, instigated by D'Annunzio, Corradini, Papini, and the like, claimed that Italy had a long and prestigious history going back to Roman times. Croce maintained, instead, that Italian history was

storia di un secolo e mezzo, a farla lunga: storia recente. E come si fa a vedere nella fisionomia italiana odierna i tratti dominanti della romanità, del borghesismo medievale e dell'uomo del Rinascimento?<sup>11</sup>

This vision of the fledgling Italian state at the beginning of its precarious but lively democratic life, was in tune with Croce's inherently anti-rhetorical conception of history and politics and did not change when Fascism promoted the image of a new empire directly descended from the Romans. Croce's major preoccupation was the 'distinzione' between concepts, which help us to read events in a constructive way, and avoid empty rhetoric. This attitude required a sharper critique of the methods of philosophy, history and their purposes. Indeed, with the Great War, for Croce, the old conception of philosophy as a grand discourse which aimed to explained the 'secret of the world' had definitely crumbled:

Se ... si osservi ... la moltitudine di ansiose domande che ha suscitato la grande guerra europea – sullo Stato, la storia, il diritto, ... la civiltà, la cultura, la barbarie, la scienza, l'arte, la religiosità, il fine e l'ideale della vita ... si acquista la chiarezza sul dovere che spetta ai filosofi di uscire dalla cerchia teologico-metafisica, nella quale essi continuano a stare rinchiusi.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of the First World War, after the dreadful carnage and desolation, in a letter to the English philosopher Wildon Carr, Croce, reflecting on the general disorientation and loss of values of an entire generation, advocated the need for a new

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<sup>10</sup> Croce, *Pagine sulla guerra*, p. 137.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

kind of 'lay faith', devoid of transcendental dreams, to embrace specific and concrete problems through a detailed analysis of their historical origin:

Io sono profondamente convinto che la società moderna, e specialmente i paesi occidentali hanno bisogno di smettere tutte le vaghe e vuote idee che sono traduzioni in linguaggio laico di vedute metafisiche e trascendenti, e *sforzarsi di conquistare la particolarità*. La cura alla quale devono sottomettersi è la più acuta distinzione dei concetti e il concreto pensiero della realtà storica. In ciò ... troveranno la vera e moderna forma della religiosità.<sup>13</sup>

For Croce, as for many contemporaries like Husserl and Freud, the crisis involved the whole of Western society in its very roots. Croce linked the crisis of Western world and its disorientation to a deep-seated lack of historical perspective. The philosopher feared that neglecting critical attention to tradition would lead to disastrous consequences. The emergence of a new geopolitical situation and the crumbling of the old European order required a radical reappraisal of history which, for Croce, was crucial for understanding the present and preparing the future. However, we will see that Croce was not, in any sense, advocating a sort of return to the 'good old days', but rather readdressing the question of a new epistemological method which took into account the complexity of the past in order to face the present in a more constructive way. The true form of 'lay religiosity' Croce was referring to consisted of a critical analysis of the past in order to face the problems of the present and build a sustainable future.

Croce's cry for an immanent philosophy which would abandon the 'vedute metafisiche e trascendenti' focusing instead on *specific problems* was reflected in his change of narrative style. After the publication of the second edition of the *Logica* in 1909 he preferred the essay form to 'philosophical treatises', a series of 'explorations' in specific fields dictated by the varied interests of his research. Thus, the rejection of 'all definitive systems' was accompanied by an impressive number of specific works of literary criticism<sup>14</sup> (those on Goethe, Ariosto and Shakespeare are regarded as classics of literary criticism) and historiography (*Storia della storiografia italiana del*

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<sup>13</sup> Letter addressed to the English philosopher H. Wildon Carr, Naples 18<sup>th</sup> February 1918, in Croce, *Epistolario I*, p.26.

<sup>14</sup> Between 1915 and 1918 Croce published twenty six critical essays in *La Critica*: on Alfieri, Monti, Schiller, Werner, Chamisso, Walter Scott, Foscolo, Leopardi, De Vigny, Manzoni, Berchet, Giusti, Heine, George Sand, Fernán Caballero, De Musset, Balzac, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Zola, Daudet, Ibsen, Maupassant, Mallarmé.

*XIX secolo, La Spagna durante la vita italiana durante la Rinascenza*). Croce's most important theoretical work of this period, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, also the result of a series of enquiries he conducted in many European journals, was first published in German under the title *Zur Theorie und Geschichte der Historiographie* (Tubing: Mohr, 1915).

We have already argued that, from the very start of his career, Croce's intention was not to construct an all-inclusive philosophy but a suitable 'strumento di lavoro' for his various interests in the fields of history and literary criticism. However, Croce himself realized that his *Filosofia dello spirito* could be interpreted as a grandiose venture, and although he would maintain the epistemological division into 'modes', he stopped writing in treatise form. This is the reason why he changed style, preferring the form of essays, articles and marginalia to that of treatises. He wanted a closer identification between the form of his writing and the epistemology underlying historiography and other fields.

The importance of the 'dissolution' of systematic thought in favour of a more flexible way of dealing with contemporary issues has constantly been underplayed by virtually all Crocean critics who prefer an image of a coherent and systematic philosopher to a more multifaceted and problematic one.<sup>15</sup> Only very recently Giuseppe Galasso has pointed to this great neglect of this essential component of Croce's thought:

L'importanza del motivo costituito nello sviluppo dello spirito e del pensiero di Croce della dissoluzione del 'sistema' è sfuggito e sfugge ancora tuttora alla letteratura su Croce.<sup>16</sup>

Another element which needs to be discussed is the political engagement of Croce between the period following the Great War and the Fascist coup. Croce took on for the first time the role of active politician. Indeed, in 1920, at a moment of acute crisis for the Italian state, the old Giovanni Giolitti was recalled as Prime Minister.

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<sup>15</sup> Recently scholars such as Sasso and Maggi have warned against the allegedly disastrous consequences of dismembering Croce's thought. The philosopher, they maintain, cannot be considered outside the idealistic framework through which he is traditionally read. This 'philological' attitude is typical of a certain group of *Crociani* who have, unfortunately, developed into something of a closed circle of 'faithful' interpreters, but more akin to a school of disciples than open hermeneutic investigators. See G. Sasso, 'Croce a pezzi' in *La Repubblica*, 1 April 1989 and M. Maggi, 'Nuove prospettive per Croce? Parliamone' in *La critica politica*, 3 (1993), pp. 7-16.

<sup>16</sup> Galasso, *Croce e lo spirito*, p.514.

Croce, who had been nominated Senator in 1910, was asked to join the Cabinet as Minister of Education. In a letter to his German friend Karl Vossler the philosopher wrote:

Mi pare di fare con ritardo il servizio militare e di riparare, in parte, a una troppo comoda condizione avuta, se non goduta, durante la guerra.<sup>17</sup>

This political ‘parenthesis’ was extremely important for Croce. Indeed it has been maintained that

Croce’s public activity sharpened and altered his abstract notion of politics, while this in turn reacted on his theoretical view of history. By the same token his writing of history itself took a new shape and dimension.<sup>18</sup>

However, despite the importance of Croce’s political ‘parenthesis’, one should be careful in drawing too *direct* a correspondence between his activity as a Senator of the Realm, and then of the Republic, and his intellectual pursuits. Too often Croce’s personal political choices have been confused with his philosophical stances, creating a distorted image of the Italian thinker.

In 1921 Bonomi succeeded Giolitti and Croce’s brief experience as a minister came to an end. Sixteen months later Mussolini would seize power. Initially the philosopher gave the Fascist regime his endorsement, as he believed that the ‘revolution’ would invigorate the nation. However, after a period of hesitancy, in 1925 Croce’s attitude changed into firm opposition. Indeed in his *Manifesto degli intellettuali antifascisti* Croce dissociated himself from the Italian authoritarian regime, becoming effectively the moral leader of the opposition. ‘During the four years between 1927 ad 1929’, Hughes reported, ‘he repeatedly spoke out against the consolidation of the dictatorship.’<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the *Camera dei deputati* had been quashed and only a small group of Senators led by Croce dared to raise any form of protest.

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<sup>17</sup> Croce, *Carteggio Croce-Vossler*, 27 July 1920, p. 273.

<sup>18</sup> Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, p.215.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.216.

The period between the First World War and the consolidation of Fascism was also the period in which Croce's ideas were most popular. His insistence on the autonomy and immanence of the historical process along with his analysis of the relations between ethics, politics and power attracted a large number of young admirers from different political positions. We have already remarked how Gramsci, Togliatti, Amendola, Gobetti, Ginzburg and Salvemini, to mention only a few, were, in one way or another, profoundly influenced by Croce's views. After the advent of Fascism Croce, in tune with his conviction that history is always responding to contemporary 'interests', would focus on the ethical 'mode'.

For the next twenty years Croce represented one of the few internal voices of dissent in a totalitarian country. Now history came to represent the preservation of memory, of all the creative elements, in opposition to the destructive ones. In this context *liberty* became the central component of contemporary concerns. On the one hand, Croce readdressed the problem of liberty in the light of a changed situation constructing a true 'rhetoric of freedom' aimed at resisting the totalitarian regime and giving hope to the regime's opponents from all political parties. On the other hand, he insisted on the need to preserve history as a vital form of knowledge in order to understand the present and prepare for the future. It is in this context that we need to read Croce's historiographical output of the time.

## 4.2 METHODOLOGY, METAPHYSICS, AND TRADITION

The aim of this section is to analyze the clarifications and developments of Croce's antimetaphysical method in *Teoria e storia della storiografia*. Particular importance is given to the philosopher's discussion of *methodology* and the incompatibility between the forms of knowledge his own produces and *metaphysics*, and the consequences of Croce's methodological notion in the field of history and historical narrative. The antimetaphysical attitude present in Croce's thought from the very outset of his intellectual career had become in *Teoria e storia* a fully conscious methodology to be applied to historiography through the four critical 'modes' he had earlier explored in the 'filosofia dello spirito'. Through the analysis of the book, it will also be shown that the widespread view of this work as a sort of epigone of Hegelianism is false,<sup>20</sup> and by contrast how remarkably dynamic are Croce's views of tradition, individual, and historical narrative.

The second part of the section treats Croce's analysis of Enlightenment, Romanticism and Positivism as essential forms in the process of construction of modern historiography. It will be shown that Croce's view of the Enlightenment ideas was dictated by his antimetaphysical methodology and not by his alleged conservatism as is usually argued. Additionally, it will be demonstrated that Croce's evaluation of Positivism demolishes the view of him as a philosopher prejudicially hostile to the movement.

The publication of *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, commissioned by the University of Halle in Germany, appeared in Italian in 1917. The fact that the book was published with a very well known German institution tells us something about Croce's popularity in Continental Europe at that time.<sup>21</sup> The book represented a break with the 'quasi-systematic' season of *Estetica, Logica* and *Pratica*. Indeed, Croce abandoned philosophical treatises for essays and polemical articles. As a matter of fact, if we compare Croce's *Filosofia dello Spirito* with his other writings (articles, essays, polemics, and commentaries) we find that there are only three volumes out of

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<sup>20</sup> For the scholar Fulvio Tessitore Croce's *Teoria e storia* is part of a Hegelian historicism which results in a closed conception of history. Tessitore maintains that Croce 'compì la scelta della storiografia universale contro la storiografia pluralistica, la prima fondata da Hegel, la seconda fondata da Humboldt.' F. Tessitore, *Contributi alla storia e alla teoria dello storicismo*, vol. iii (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1997), p.366. See also his article 'Il giudizio di Croce su Ranke', in *La Cultura*, 2 (1993), pp. 283-93.

<sup>21</sup> While Croce's fame was at its peak in Germany, it began to decrease in France after his neutralist position during the First World War. See Sergio Romano, in *Per la conoscenza di Croce in Francia* (Naples: Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici, 1984).

seventy which were conceived in a 'systematic' way and we have already stressed that Croce's intention was not to build an all-encompassing project but to provide a useful epistemological division.<sup>22</sup>

An important insight into the philosopher's intellectual interests of this period is contained in his *Contributo alla critica di me stesso*:

Mi ridetti a vivere la vita e leggere libri non di filosofi quanto di poeti e storici; e dopo un po' sorsero spontanee le mie meditazioni intorno alla *Filosofia del Vico*, le dissertazioni sulla *Teoria* e sulla *Storia della storiografia*, i *Frammenti di Etica*; tutti saggi che rompono i cancelli del preteso sistema.<sup>23</sup>

It is fundamental in the above passage to look at Croce's emphasis on 'breaking the portals of the *alleged* system' and his concentration on 'non – philosophical' authors, all of which amounts to a tangible sign of his broader conception of philosophical inquiry. Croce was aware that many critics had misinterpreted his work, and was eager to present his research as series of inquiries in specific fields.

*Teoria e storia* not only represented a review of Croce's own reflections on history and historiography but was also a critical exploration and application of these conceptions on periods ranging from antiquity to the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the book is divided into two parts, namely the epistemological and the historical. This division is not just a question of style. We have already seen that in *Logica* Croce maintained that speculation could not be separated from the historical process in which it is created. In other words, we need to understand the history of concepts and ideas and how they were formed to be aware of their foundations. *Teoria e storia* concluded the theoretical premises of *Logica*<sup>24</sup> maintaining that philosophy is essentially *methodology of historiography*.

For Croce, Hegel was right to think that there was a historical relation between concepts and facts. However, we have already seen that the German philosopher's way of perceiving this relation was to subsume history into philosophy, creating a

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<sup>22</sup> 'La filosofia sistematica ... comprende soltanto una parte dell'effettivo filosofare, il quale non di rado è più vivo ed energico ... nelle manifestazioni episodiche o monografiche.' Croce, *Storia dell'età barocca in Italia* (Bari: Laterza, 1967), p.60.

<sup>23</sup> B. Croce, *Contributo*, p.65.

<sup>24</sup> *Teoria e storia*, reported Croce in the introduction to the book written in 1916, 'non forma una nuova parte sistematica, ed è da considerare piuttosto come approfondimento ed ampliamento alla teoria della storiografia già delineata in alcuni capitoli ... della *Logica*. Croce, *Teoria e storia*, p. v.

ready-made scheme to which historical events had to be made to conform.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, Croce maintained that history is an *immanent and free* process which could not be encased in any preconceived plan. Thus Croce's way of solving the problem was the opposite of Hegel's: it is history which establishes the rules according to which thought develops, not vice versa. Consequently, for the Italian philosopher, it was philosophy that had to be subsumed into history:

La Filosofia, in conseguenza della nuova relazione in cui è stata posta, non può essere necessariamente altro che *il momento metodologico della Storiografia*: dilucidazione delle categorie costitutive dei giudizi storici, ossia dei concetti direttivi dell'interpretazione storica.<sup>26</sup>

Whereas in earlier writings Croce had insisted on their interconnectedness, at this point, he firmly establish the epistemological priority of the historical over the conceptual. Instead of a grand philosophical scheme to be applied to history Croce underlined the importance of *taking philosophical concepts to their historical genesis*. In other words, a correct understanding of philosophical questions, in Croce, required an understanding of their specific history. This was also the criterion by which to judge the value of a theoretical problem:

Se un problema filosofico si dimostra affatto sterile per il giudizio storico, si ha in ciò la prova che quel problema è ... malamente posto ... Se la soluzione di un problema, cioè di una proposizione filosofica, invece di rendere meglio intelligibile la storia, la lascia oscura o la confonde, o vi salta sopra e la condanna e la nega, si ha in ciò la prova che quella proposizione, e la filosofia con la quale si lega, è arbitraria.<sup>27</sup>

Croce maintained that the notion of philosophy as methodology was the result of an *antimetaphysical conception* which rejected all forms of transcendence to concentrate on the relation between concepts and history. We have already seen, in analyzing Croce's 'modes' of critique, that this perspective was most useful because

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<sup>25</sup> This charge may or may not be true; Hegel himself was aware of the objection and tried to refute it in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of History*. However, I am here concerned with Croce's view of Hegel rather than the true interpretation of the German philosopher's thought.

<sup>26</sup> Croce, *Teoria*, p. 136.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.136-37.



of its capacity to approach concrete problems in a non-reductive way. Indeed, he argued that

la superiorità della filosofia come *Metodologia* sulla filosofia come *Metafisica*, è dimostrata dalla capacità della prima a risolvere, *criticandoli e assegnandole la genesi*, i problemi della seconda, laddove la Metafisica non è capace di risolvere non solo quelli della metodologia, ma nemmeno i propri problemi senza dare nel fantastico e nell'arbitrario.<sup>28</sup>

The metaphysical attitude, Croce argued, is obsessed with *one fundamental problem* in philosophy from which the others necessarily flow. This is expressed by its fixation on grounding thought in an external, or transcendent, cause (God, Reason, Idea, or Progress) which would explain all aspects of reality. Croce maintained instead that

noi trascorriamo di problema in problema filosofico sotto la sollecitazione della nostra vita vissuta ... E se guardiamo al più largo ... spettacolo che offre la storia .... della filosofia osserviamo il medesimo: che cioè secondo i tempi e i popoli, ora i problemi filosofici della morale, ora quelli della politica ora della religione ora delle scienze naturali e delle matematiche hanno avuto le prime parti ... ma non mai s'incontra un problema generale, per sé stante, della filosofia.<sup>29</sup>

Thus the conception of philosophy as methodology, by contrast with its metaphysical status, which is obsessed with the 'problema generale', allows us to read the past in a more flexible and dynamic way, focusing on *specific problems* and broadening the spectrum of our philosophical enquiries:

Il ... nuovo concetto invita a rivolgere l'attenzione a pensieri e a pensatori, che sono stati a lungo trascurati o tenuti in grado secondario e considerati non propriamente filosofi, perché non trattarono direttamente del 'problema fondamentale', della filosofia, o del *grand peut-être*, e si occuparono nei problemi particolari ... È semplice effetto di pregiudizio stimare un Machiavelli che pone il concetto dello Stato moderno ... o un Vico, che rinnova tutte le scienze dello spirito, o un Hamann che ha così forte sentimento del valore della tradizione, per filosofi minori ... sia anche di un Cartesio o di uno Spinoza, che si posero *altri* problemi, ma non *superiori* ai problemi di quelli.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp.138-39. Italics mine.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.140.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Another consequence of the adoption of this methodology, which considered history and thought closely interwoven, is a different and more flexible approach to past philosophies:

Alla filosofia come ‘problema fondamentale’ corrispondeva ... una storia della filosofia schematica e scheletrica: *alla filosofia come metodologia deve corrispondere una storia della filosofia assai più ricca, varia e pieghevole*, che consideri come filosofia non solo ciò che si attiene al problema della immanenza e della trascendenza, del mondo e dell’altro mondo, ma tutto ciò che è valso ad accrescere il patrimonio dei concetti direttivi e *l’intelligenza della storia effettiva*, e a formare la realtà di pensiero nella quale viviamo.<sup>31</sup>

The above passage, like many others present in the book, was deliberately ignored, when it came to branding Croce as a relic of a 19<sup>th</sup> century idealism with little connection with contemporary issues.<sup>32</sup> However, we miss the essential part of Croce’s thought if we fail to notice his great attention to a new approach to history. The implications of this methodological view are extremely important. Indeed, philosophy conceived as methodology rejects the conception of a ‘definitive philosophy’ which is the outcome of all conceptual preoccupations with a ‘fundamental problem’ since

La filosofia definitiva, contenuta come esigenza nella concezione del problema fondamentale, contrasta con l’esperienza storica.<sup>33</sup>

Hence, *historical experience* is the authentic terrain on which knowledge is tested. Our thought, implicitly or not, is always conditioned by the past.

Since, for Croce, philosophy had ceased to be a ‘theological’ discipline obsessed with the ultimate Truth, the role of the philosopher in society had to change accordingly. He was not an awakened or ‘risvegliato’, a sort of Buddha<sup>34</sup> who possessed an esoteric knowledge closed to common people; he became instead an individual engaged with the issues of his contemporary culture, aware of his theoretical methods:

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.148. Italics mine.

<sup>32</sup> See for instance M. L. Salvadori, ‘Croce sapore di classico’, *La Stampa*, 17 July 1990.

<sup>33</sup> Croce, *Teoria*, p.143.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.145.

il filosofo mistico o apolitico della decadenza greco-romana poteva bene distaccarsi dal mondo: i grandi pensatori che inaugurarono la filosofia moderna, potevano, come Hegel, ... concepire una sfera dello spirito assoluto ... ma la figura ... del filosofo beato nell'Assoluto, quando si cerchi di rinnovarla nel nostro mondo moderno, si tinge di comico.<sup>35</sup>

Here not only is there a polemic with Gentile and the philosophers who used a sort of mystical jargon to which only the initiated could gain access, but also with a conception of the philosopher as a thinker detached from mundane knowledge. Croce, instead, advocated the disappearance of the 'pure philosopher', to be replaced by researchers fully aware of the philosophical assumptions underlying procedures in their specific fields of operation:

un forte avanzamento della cultura filosofica dovrebbe tendere a questo effetto: che tutti gli studiosi delle cose umane, giuristi, economisti, moralisti, letterati, ossia tutti gli studiosi di cose storiche, diventino consapevoli e disciplinati filosofi; e il filosofo in generale, il *philosophus purus*, non trovi più luogo tra le specificazioni professionali del sapere.<sup>36</sup>

Another corollary of the conception of philosophy as methodology is that there is no privileged literature, there are no 'holy texts', which philosophers employ. Their efforts are instead broadened to the great wealth of tradition with a different attitude:

Un preconcetto turba ... il modo di *cultura* che gli studiosi di filosofia si sogliono dare, e che consiste nel frugare quasi esclusivamente i libri dei filosofi 'in generale', dei sistematori della metafisica: così come il dotto in teologia si formava sui sacri testi. Questo modo di cultura ... è affatto inconsequente e inadeguato in *una filosofia immanente e storica, che trae materia da tutte le più varie impressioni della vita*.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, philosophy as a 'mystical' discipline disappears to be replaced with *critical reflections* on the method of a given discipline, and philosophical style changes accordingly:

Ora che ... la filosofia si esplica come dilucidazione delle categorie dell'interpretazione storica, non la *grandiosa architettura da tempio*, e

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.145.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.147. Italics mine.

non la lirica dell'inno sacro si confà per l'istituto, ma la *discussione*, la *polemica* ... *che non è astretta ad osservare le regole che sembravano proprie del contenuto teologico o religioso.*<sup>38</sup>

If we now apply this methodological procedure to the historical narrative there are several consequences to be underlined. Firstly, we notice that in Croce there is no privileged viewpoint or 'metastoria'<sup>39</sup> from which historians see the historical process. Consequently, historical narrative and approaches change with historical paradigms and their necessities:

La storia, in ogni istante, si travaglia nel perfezionarsi, ossia nel proprio arricchimento e approfondimento, e non c'è storia che pienamente ci contenti perchè ogni nostra costruzione genera nuovi fatti e nuovi problemi e sollecita nuove soluzioni. *Così si narra sempre di nuovo*, lumeggiandola sempre diversamente, la storia di Roma e di Grecia e del Cristianesimo e della Riforma e della Rivoluzione francese e della filosofia e della letteratura e di qualsiasi altra materia.<sup>40</sup>

Secondly, there is no *absolute concept* which reveals the final meaning of historiography, but rather groups of questions to be answered. We have already seen in chapter two that Croce was defiant of any 'philosophy of history' which aimed to replace historical events with abstract constructions. Transposed onto the field of historiography this attitude produces grandiose projects of 'universal history' that Croce named effectively 'romanzi teologici'. The impossible aim of these all-embracing accounts is,

ridurre in un quadro tutti i fatti del genere umano, dalle origini di esso sulla terra al momento presente; anzi ... dall'origine delle cose sino alla fine del mondo; donde la sua tendenza a ... romanzi teologici ... e ... delineare in qualche modo l'avvenire, o con rivelazioni e profezie.<sup>41</sup>

Instead, philosophy had to be conceived as a *method of critique* to be applied to specific problems which change with time, with the nature of research, and the interests dictated by the 'spiritual' situation (aesthetic, logical, economic and ethical) of an epoch. We apply concepts and categories only to specific problems in specific

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp.146-47. Italics mine.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.114.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp.36-37. Italics mine.

periods. For instance, we can talk about the evolution of techniques and study how they have been changing throughout various epochs, to solve a specific problem (housing, eating or motion, for example), but we cannot apply the concept of evolution or progress to ‘humanity’ in general, since we cannot know the final stage or aim of our race. Our questioning has to be focused on the particular, or *individual*, rather than the general, or *universal*:

Abbiamo negato ... l’idea di una storia *universale* ... come quella di una storia *generale* e fatto valere l’opposta ... sentenza: che la storia è sempre *particolare* ed è sempre *speciale*.<sup>42</sup>

The third consequence, in historiography, of Croce’s antimetaphysical method is an *anti-teleological approach to events*.<sup>43</sup> There is no final aim, or eschatology,<sup>44</sup> in the historical process, which is entirely *immanent* and *free* and has to be studied in its specificity. Croce’s conception of history is an open one. Indeed, for Croce, history, as an entirely immanent process, does not have a *telos* or end. We will see that even when Croce identified history with liberty his aim was, beyond the immediate ‘political’ and rhetorical purposes, to emphasize the free course of both narrative and events against the big ‘philosophies of history’ of Hegel or Oswald Spengler.<sup>45</sup> These grand narratives were, for Croce, fictions which attempted a *definitive account* of events.

Another implication which derives from Croce’s hostility to dogmatic thought, is his view of tradition. We have already seen that for Croce historians have to acknowledge that all attempts to narrate a ‘definitive’ history are misplaced, and historical narrative is conceived as an open process free from any reductionism. In this context tradition plays a crucial role. Indeed, for the philosopher, tradition is essential for understanding the epistemological framework of our present. It is the unremitting reading and questioning of the categories through tradition which allows us to identify the attributes of the present in an open narrative. We have seen that for

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p.46.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.126.

<sup>43</sup> The Crocean Franchini rightly remarked that ‘la storia ... non ha un fine fuori di sé nè un valore che la trascende e nemmeno può risolversi nel mito di una totalità in sé che possa dettarne il progresso.’ Franchini, *La teoria della storia di Benedetto Croce*, p. 85.

<sup>44</sup> Among the authors of eschatological histories Croce mentioned Polybius, Saint Augustine and Hegel. See *Teoria e storia*, pp. 45-48.

<sup>45</sup> On Oswald Spengler see Croce’s review ‘Der Untergang des Abendlandes’, *La Critica*, xvii (1919), pp. 236-39.

Croce historiography does not reflect an immutable ‘reality’ but, ‘narra sempre di nuovo’, namely creates new connections and interpretations of the past. But how can we be sure that our judgements are true? For the philosopher, only a critical engagement with past practices, institutions and customs (what Croce called ‘history of the spirit’) could give us the right weaponry to reflect on our present time. Many critics have interpreted this ‘epistemic’ dedication to tradition on the part of Croce as a sign of an intrinsically conservative posture. However, Croce’s outlook on the past is much more multifaceted and challenging than is usually thought. In reality, tradition was not conceived of by the philosopher as a monolith to which one has to remain faithful,<sup>46</sup> but rather as a powerful element which conditions and somehow shapes the views of our present life. In *Il carattere della filosofia moderna* the philosopher would reply to his critics:

Non ha senso la corrente accusa data allo storicismo che esso, spiegando ... il passato, induca all’adorazione del fatto compiuto e al quietismo, perché ... *il passato che così si pensa non fu mai compiuto e stabile, ma sempre in movimento e cambiamento, ed è indiscutibile dal nostro presente*, inquieto anch’esso e non adagiandosi in soluzioni, ma laborioso nel porre nuovi problemi che saranno nuove soluzioni.<sup>47</sup>

This fluid conception of history and tradition should be remembered when we analyze the similarities between Croce’s theory of history and hermeneutics. In the *Logica* the philosopher had shown that what we usually perceive as permanent or immutable such as political and social institutions, values and even individuals are the result of a given historical tradition to be explored in its aesthetic, logical, economic, and ethical implications. Indeed, in *Teoria e storia* Croce maintained that individuals are not atomistic entities separated from history and society; on the contrary, they interact with this complex web of relations. This notion implies that we cannot separate individuals from their historical context which moulds their identity. Croce spurned the idea of individuals as *totally free* agents in favour of a notion of individuals as having an identity which is at least partly given before any decisions or choices can be made. Croce here wanted to show the ‘historical construction’ of what

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<sup>46</sup> For Badaloni, for instance, Croce’s historicism is ‘accettazione integrale del passato’ N. Badaloni, *Marxismo come storicismo* (Milan : Feltrinelli, 1975), p.135.

<sup>47</sup> Croce, *Il carattere*, p.100. Italics mine.

we call 'individual' which was again a direct consequence of his anti-metaphysical method. Indeed, the individual as an immutable substance does not exist:

Il nostro 'io sostanziale', la gemma fulgida e dura che dovremmo possedere in noi ... non esiste altrove che nella fallace escogitazione delle metafisiche e tra i fumi dell'amor proprio inebriato.<sup>48</sup>

For Croce, individuals are the result of a composite process of relations between history and other individuals, not fixed in a permanent condition. Individuals are born in an aesthetic, logical, economic and ethical framework to which they refer. They might refer to it in a polemical, or a critical way, but they are formed within a given historical tradition which will be expressed by its norms, customs, tastes and values. If we grant that tradition is a dynamic force which conditions our identity, views, and values, we cannot accept the idea of an unchangeable individual in a timeless situation. That is the reason why Croce maintained that 'gli uomini non *sono* ma *diventano* in perpetuo'.<sup>49</sup> Thus we *become* individuals through our history, we are 'made' by it.

However, the philosopher made clear that his emphasis on historical context did not imply a view in which 'gli individui sono formiche che il masso schiaccia'.<sup>50</sup> It is essential to note that, for Croce, the individual does not passively and uncritically adopt externally imposed standards from tradition. In other words, Croce's recognition of the individual subject's relation to a given tradition did not imply the liquidation of the subject.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the philosopher warned that

Chi taglia fuori dalla storia gli individui ... ha tagliato fuori, con essi, la storia stessa.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Croce, *Etica e politica*, p. 125.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.143.

<sup>50</sup> Croce, *Teoria e storia*, p.87.

<sup>51</sup> Roberts has justly remarked that, 'when Croce seemed to downplay individual agency, he was often attacking one of two important tendencies. First, any cult of the individual ... Second, Croce wanted to counter the tendency to overemphasize the role of the great person in history.' Roberts, *Benedetto Croce*, p.130.

<sup>52</sup> Croce, *Teoria e storia*, p.93. 'La storia concepita sopra e fuori gli individui e che preme sugli individui imponendo presunte leggi e regole fisse, è, tutt'insieme annullamento della storia e annullamento di ogni dovere.' Croce, *Il carattere*, p.209.

Hence, the question was not, as the argument of many detractors of the philosopher goes, the annihilation of the individual in favour of an idealistic form of history.<sup>53</sup> In fact, Croce clearly stated that

Individuo e idea, separatamente presi, sono due astrazioni equivalenti e inadatte l'una e l'altra a fornire il soggetto alla storia<sup>54</sup>.

We have already stressed how Croce's notion of individuals was in line with his hostility towards reductionism and his antimetaphysical method. In addition, we can say that this view had important repercussions in historiography since it rejected the artificial opposition between a 'collectivist' history and an 'individualistic' one:

Il contrasto tra una storiografia 'collettivistica' e una storiografia 'individualistica', non si comporrà mai, fintanto che gli uni assegneranno alla collettività il potere creativo delle idee e delle istituzioni, e gli altri all'individuo geniale, essendo entrambi le affermazioni vere in ciò che includono e false in ciò che escludono<sup>55</sup>.

Hence, it is the interaction rather than the opposition between the individual and the collective which allows a more balanced and multifaceted historical construction. It should be clear by now that the investigation of the past, for Croce, is not a sort of antiquarian pastime entrusted to a few scholars, but a *vital* need in order to understand and assess the authenticity of our present, as individuals and as part of a social, or 'spiritual', context. We are aware of thoughts and actions when we are able to read the history behind them. History, our present life and identity, in this vision, are inextricably connected. This is the real sense of Croce's famous statement that 'ogni vera storia è storia contemporanea.'<sup>56</sup> From this viewpoint, in Croce, history ceased to be a mere academic discipline to become a way of understanding reality common to all human beings. However, this conception does not imply that Croce was not interested in the technical or methodological side of history, as many critics have

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<sup>53</sup> See for example Sartori: 'L'individuo sparisce in Croce per ragioni idealistiche ... Ci sono componenti di valori concreti che Croce ha ignorato o anche ucciso: il valore dell'individuo persona e il valore della normativa etica.' 'Croce. L'etica, la politica. Conversazione con Giovanni Sartori.', in P. Bonetti, *Per conoscere Croce* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1998), pp. 67-89 (p. 73).

<sup>54</sup> Croce, *Teoria e storia*, p. 93.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.



maintained. On the contrary, we have seen that Croce's main effort was to provide a suitable method for narrating history.

Croce's famous polemic against philology should be read in this context. Indeed, Croce used as a polemical target a certain kind of historian who had 'l'ingenua credenza dei filologi di tener chiusa nelle loro biblioteche, musei, archivi, la storia.'<sup>57</sup> The 'philological' attitude in history does not take into account the complexity of the historical account, its repercussions on both the theoretical (rhetoric and logic) and the practical (ethics and politics) fields:

Le cronache ripulite tagliuzzate, ricombinate, riordinate, restano pur sempre cronache, cioè narrazioni vuote: i documenti restaurati, riprodotti, descritti, allineati, restano documenti, cioè cose mute. La storia filologica si riduce al travasamento di più libri o di più parti di vari libri in nuovo libro ... onde la storia filologica può essere bensì *corretta* ma non *vera* ... e come è priva di verità è priva di interesse storico, ossia non reca luce intorno a un ordine di fatti che risponda a un bisogno pratico ed etico.<sup>58</sup>

In other words, the philological conception of history left the discipline in the hands of a few 'experts' turning it into an arid exercise for ascertaining sources and references.

However, it is important to state that Croce did not underplay the role of philology in history; he simply reacted polemically to a certain kind of historiography which tended to ossify the dynamic process of the past. We have seen that this broad conception of history did not exclude, at least in principle, any narrative which attempted an account of the past to better explain our present.

If we bear in mind Croce's dynamic perception of history and tradition we can also fully appreciate the significance of the second part of *Teoria e storia*. Here, the philosopher tested different conceptions of historiography in order to clarify the genesis of philosophy conceived as methodology, aware of its historical limitations, in opposition to an all-encompassing conception of knowledge.

Fundamental for our purpose, which focuses on Croce's anti-metaphysical method, is the critique of the main movements which created modern thought, namely Enlightenment, Romanticism and Positivism. We have already remarked that for

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.19.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp.20-21.

Croce, the main flaw of Enlightenment was its dogmatic conception of rationality, regarded as completely detached from any historical context, and its tendency to consider institutions and values as timeless and universal.<sup>59</sup> The consequence of this attitude was the exclusion of the historical dimension from the sphere of knowledge. Noteworthy is Rousseau's judgement on history, defined as 'l'art de choisir entre plusieurs mensonges, celui qui ressemble mieux à la vérité'.<sup>60</sup> This view led to an oversimplified form of historiography in which,

i sacerdoti ingannano, i cortigiani intrigano, i saggi monarchi escogitano ed attuano buone istituzioni, combattute o rese presto vane dalla malignità altrui e dalla plebea ignoranza, e nondimeno perpetuo oggetto di ammirazione e di gratitudine per gli spiriti rischiarati.<sup>61</sup>

Reason, explained Croce, was conceived of as a sort of universal power, an inaccessible divinity to which every aspect of life conformed, instead of the result of a given historical development. More generally, this attitude created a gap between philosophy and concrete human experience. It resulted in an abstract universalism in all fields. Furthermore, this tendency lost the substance of morality in scholastic reflections of 'good', 'virtue', 'justice' and 'rights'. The philosopher drew attention to the barely concealed theological language of this conception as this ironical passage shows:

Tutti sentono e dicono che si è usciti non solo dalle tenebre ma dai chiarori antelucani, e il sole della Ragione è alto sull'orizzonte e rischiarava gli intelletti e li irradia di luce vivissima. 'Luce', 'rischiaramento e simili, sono le parole che si pronunziano ad ogni tratto e con sempre maggiore persuasione ed energia, onde il nome ... dell' 'illuminismo', che si dà dal periodo che va da Cartesio a Kant.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, within this perspective, the assertive power of reason was praised with religious zest and Croce observed how

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<sup>59</sup> 'Atteggiamento tipico della dottrina illuministica era ... postulare, conformemente a certe aspirazioni utopistiche dell'uomo, degli istituti che non fossero sottoposti alla inesorabile legge della usura storica, delle istituzioni definitive che garantissero una stabilità perenne alla società umana. Ma proprio contro questa concezione Croce si pone, vedendone l'aspetto mitico ... utile forse in momenti in cui è necessario suscitare emozioni ... per raggiungere fini pratici immediate, ma inaccettabile dal punto di vista logico.' G. Cotroneo, *Croce e l'Illuminismo* (Naples: Giannini, 1970), pp.163-64.

<sup>60</sup> Croce, *Teoria e storia*, p.24.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.229.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.224.

A nessuno può rimanere celato il carattere religioso di questa nuova concezione del mondo, che ripete in terminologia laica i concetti cristiani di Dio che è verità e giustizia ... di paradiso terrestre, di redenzione, di millennio e via discorrendo; e che al pari del cristianesimo oppone a sé l'intera storia precedente e la condanna, e appena qua e là vi ammira qualche consolante barlume di sé stessa.<sup>63</sup>

Croce found a similar inclination in some contemporary philosophies which entertained the project of re-drawing the *definitive* forms, or 'essences' of reason.<sup>64</sup>

We have seen that for the Italian philosopher one cannot isolate concepts from their historical framework if one wants to understand their effective significance. Hence, a proper understanding of a philosophy or a cultural movement has to refer to a precise *relation* between the directive categories *and* the historical context we are considering. We have already seen, in analyzing the *Logica*, that the separation of the two, for Croce, creates an unresolvable problem. Indeed, if we consider the categories of a certain period, ignoring their implicit historicity, we are left with mere abstractions. On the other hand, we have already seen that for Croce history itself, to be explained, needs to rely on categories which disclose the meaning of what we are studying.

It is worth noting that this critique of the Enlightenment's principles and its fundamental incapacity to grasp the historical dimension of concepts and institutions was to be taken up by the philosophers of the Frankfurt school and later in France by the 'nouveaux philosophes' like Foucault, Derrida and Ricoeur. Moreover, in Britain, thinkers like Isaiah Berlin and Alasdair MacIntyre made similar critiques of the Enlightenment era.<sup>65</sup> What is astonishing in all these analyses is the absence of any reference to Croce's vital contribution to the dissolution of the 'Enlightenment myth'. Indeed, the major reference to the critique of the Enlightenment is to R.G.

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p.227.

<sup>64</sup> See, for instance Wittgenstein's introduction to the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* written in 1918: 'The truth of the thoughts communicated here seems to me unassailable and definitive. I am therefore of the opinion that the problems have in essential finally been solved.' L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (Routledge: London and New York, 1998), p. 27.

<sup>65</sup> See A. MacIntyre, 'Why the Enlightenment project of justifying morality had to fail', pp. 51-61, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1994). MacIntyre's critique of what he suitably calls the 'Enlightenment project' and its failure to deal with the historical is surprisingly similar to Croce's.

Collingwood and his *The Idea of History* which is mostly based, on the author's own admission, on Croce's investigations.<sup>66</sup>

It is essential here to stress that *Croce's polemic with the Enlightenment was part of his antimetaphysical posture and not an endemically anti-democratic consequence of his alleged conservative standpoint*, as many critics have claimed.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Croce's polemic with Enlightenment did not fall into the merely political domain, but was a much more complex theoretical critique linked to his dynamic perception of the nature of thought in history.

The same argument can be applied to Croce's critique of liberal-democracy. Croce's antimetaphysical conception of history rejected the claim of classical liberalism to be the *absolute and ultimate* political form. Liberty, Croce maintained, is a concept which cannot be reduced to the liberal-democratic theory but has to be understood each time in its particular historical framework. To maintain that Anglo – American liberalism, for instance, is the highest political form for *all times* is to disregard other political forms which did not stem from that tradition but that could be felt to be equally effective, or 'free'. However, Croce's conceptual separation between the liberal-democratic tradition and the idea of 'liberty' which does not necessarily coincide with the Anglo-American tradition, did not imply a political hostility on the part of the philosopher to democracy and its practices. It simply confirmed an essential consequence of Croce's antimetaphysical attitude which rejected perpetual forms, either theoretical or political, to be applied to all people at all times. Later, Croce's *political* position would become more ambiguous, partly because of his fear of a Bolshevik dictatorship following Fascism, partly because of the extremely polarized atmosphere which followed the end of the Second World War.<sup>68</sup> However, we need to take into account the fact that 'liberty', on the political terrain, will become a formidable rhetorical tool for organizing the resistance to Fascism, involving groups from different political backgrounds.

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<sup>66</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946). The degree of Collingwood's debt to Croce has frequently been object of debate. For a sense of the issues see B. Haddock 'Croce, Collingwood and the characterization of historical knowledge', *Criterion*, 10 (1992), pp. 10-25.

<sup>67</sup> Several critics, following Bobbio's critique of the mid-fifties in his already mentioned *Politica e cultura*, see in Croce's hostility to the Enlightenment's principles a sign of the endemically anti-democratic character of his thought. For the 'liberale' Giuseppe Bedeschi, for instance, there was in Croce a 'concezione ferina ... della vita dei popoli e degli Stati e dei loro rapporti; concezione hegeliana che escludeva ... qualunque teoria dello Stato come giustizia'. Bedeschi, *La fabbrica delle ideologie*, p. 106.

A historic reaction to the role of absolute reason was initiated by the Romantic Movement. It is with Romanticism, for Croce, that European thought started to reflect on the relation between history and ideas. We have already seen, however, that, earlier than this according to Croce, the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico had been the pioneer of a 'modern' conception of history where ideas, truth, and facts were in close relation:

Nella *Scienza Nuova* ... Vico criticò l'illuminismo solo ai suoi inizi, e nondimeno penetrò meglio che gli altri dipoi nei suoi riposti motivi e meglio misurò le conseguenze logiche e pratiche. Onde contrappose al superficiale scherno esercitato verso il passato in nome dell'astratta ragione lo spiegarsi della mente umana nella storia, come senso, fantasia e intelletto.<sup>69</sup>

However, Vico's insights on history were overshadowed by Descartes' abstract rationalism which did not leave space for any other discipline except for the exact sciences. This, despite Vico's own trenchant critique of Cartesian rationalism and its relegation of history to a discipline of secondary importance. The Italian philosopher had to be rediscovered in the twentieth century as an important theorist of history and Croce, with his friend and collaborator Fausto Nicolini, played a major role in reassessing Vico's importance.<sup>70</sup>

The Romantics, however, felt it necessary to turn to tradition with the emergence of the modern nation-states. The conception of history of the Romantic period was influenced by a strong demand for national identity and, mainly driven by rhetoric and historiography, 'entrò in stretta relazione e scambio col nuovo genere letterario, il romanzo storico'.<sup>71</sup> Croce characterized this kind of narrative history as 'storiografia nostalgica' or 'storiografia restauratrice'.<sup>72</sup> In other words the Romantic conception of history was driven by an idealization of the past and a need for

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<sup>68</sup> This issue will be analyzed in detail in chapter 5.

<sup>69</sup> Croce, *Teoria*, p.248.

<sup>70</sup> Croce could be considered the discoverer of Vico's relevance in philosophy: 'For better than half a century the late Benedetto Croce labored to establish Giambattista Vico's claim to originality, and his right to a prominent, not to say unique place in the history of European thought. Seconded and supported by his colleague Fausto Nicolini, Croce consistently reiterated his belief in the breadth and fecundity of Vico's achievement. And the extent of Vico's current fame, as well as the high prestige that Vico enjoys in so many different disciplines, is attributable in considerable part to their tireless advocacy of his cause. To deny as much would be both imprecise and niggardly.' H. White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p.218.

<sup>71</sup> Croce, *Teoria e storia*, p.244.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

restoration. Nonetheless, Romanticism conceived human institutions and customs as a *development*, or ‘svolgimento’, depending on a given tradition which implicitly gave history a new epistemological status:

Tutta la storia è ora concepita come svolgimento necessario, o perciò tutta implicitamente, e più o meno anche esplicitamente redenta, tutta appresa con sentimento sacro, quale già nel medioevo si riserbava a quelle sole parti di essa, che rappresentavano la potenza di Dio contro la potenza diabolica. Talché il concetto di svolgimento fu esteso all’età classica, e poi, col crescere delle cognizioni e dell’attenzione, alle civiltà orientali.<sup>73</sup>

Hence, according to Croce, the great merit of Romanticism is its view of history as in essential relation with human customs and culture. The abstract concept of ‘nature’ of Enlightenment thinking was replaced by the awareness of a past which forms our views. The consequences of this new attitude towards history was a re-evaluation of customs and epochs neglected by the Enlightenment, such as the Middle Ages, which resulted in a new approach to religious studies and a new awareness of the complexity of historiography:

Diventa allora detto comune che non si può intendere la letteratura senza conoscere le idee e i costumi, la politica senza la filosofia ... o il diritto e i costumi e le idee senza l’economia.<sup>74</sup>

According to Croce, Idealism, the theoretical form of Romanticism, established the theoretical link between ideas and historiography with Hegel’s vast philosophical project. However, the German philosopher ended up with constructing a panlogistic system which separated the realm of ideas from that of events, and reduced historical phenomena to empty empirical data subordinate to a *transcendent* idea of Spirit hovering over human actions. The reification of the Idea, now seen as the supreme principle in history, led Romantic historiography to

Una *storia apriori* che sarebbe la storia vera, dedotta da puri concetti ...una storia più o meno diversa dagli avvenimenti e fatti umani, e, come storia *filosofica*, lasciando fuori di sè, quasi rifiuto, una storia meramente *narrativa*.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.249.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

This aprioristic conception of history, with its distinction between a philosophical and a narrative history produced, inevitably, along with several outstanding classical works of historiography, a *metaphysics of history*, or ‘filosofia della storia’.

Positivism reacted violently against this tendency with the rejection of ‘philosophy’ and a form of historiography based on ‘pure facts’. Philosophical speculation was then considered ruinous for a correct understanding of history. Instead, one had to go back to ‘reality’, namely to documents and hard evidence. Philology, dismissed by the Romantics as a waste of time, was adopted as the main tool to validate historical statements of fact.

It is interesting to see here Croce’s assessment of the *merits* of Positivist historiography:

Sarebbe erroneo credere che gli acquisti del romanticismo andassero perduti nel positivismo, perchè guardando ... più attentamente le storie di questo periodo, si vede come si fossero tutti serbati. Il romanticismo l’aveva fatta finita col dualismo storico, pel quale c’erano nella realtà fatti ... eletti e reprobì: e il positivismo ripeteva che *tutti i fatti sono fatti* e tutti hanno pari diritto a entrare nella storia.<sup>76</sup>

These words, which are part of a seventeen-page section entitled ‘La storiografia del Positivismo’,<sup>77</sup> contradict the common view of a Croce obstinately closed to the importance of this movement. Positivism, for the philosopher, had produced

un beneficio durevole. I libri di storia, divennero, per virtù del positivismo, meno semplicistici e più ricchi di fatti, specialmente di quelle classi di fatti che il romanticismo aveva trascurate, come le disposizioni ... naturali, le ... illusioni psicologiche, gli interessi che si dicono materiali, la produzione e distribuzione della ricchezza, ossia l’operosità economica.<sup>78</sup>

For Croce, Positivism and Romanticism, far from being movements in conflict were instead *complementary* and contributed to create a new sensibility for historiography. On the one hand Romanticism had insisted on the importance of history in the formation of our culture, nation and civilization, on the other Positivism developed this ideas with particular reference to society:

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.259.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 265-82.

Il romanticismo, agli abissi e ai salti che la storiografia anteriore introduceva nel corso degli avvenimenti aveva sostituito il concetto di svolgimento e il positivismo ripeteva quel concetto chiamandolo *evoluzione*. Il romanticismo aveva periodizzato lo svolgimento, sia per cerchi di fasi come il Vico ... sia in ordine lineare, come i romantici tedeschi ... e il positivismo rinnovava queste concezioni ... Il romanticismo aveva non solo rafforzato le storie dei valori ideali, ma concepitele in organica connessione; e il positivismo insisteva *sulla interdipendenza dei fattori sociali e sulla unità del reale*.<sup>79</sup>

Another great merit of Positivism was, for Croce, its rejection of transcendent causes to explain the complexity of historical events. This disposition had started during the Romantic era but it was only with Positivism that it became part of historians' consciousness.<sup>80</sup> Positivism drew attention to other elements which shape the historical account, namely social, economic and political factors. The conclusions of Croce's analysis of Positivism would disorientate those critics who maintain that he was prejudicially disposed towards this movement:

Tutto intento a negare i valori della trascendenza e ad osservare le cose che lo attraevano, il positivismo si sentiva, ed era per questa parte, nel vero; e chiunque di noi presta la dovuta attenzione a quegli ordini di cose e rinnova quella negazione, raccoglie il frutto del positivismo, e per tale aspetto è positivista.<sup>81</sup>

However, despite this correct claim for an historical knowledge free from a transcendent form of philosophy and concerned with 'facts', the disciples of Positivism ended up denying the influence of *any philosophy*, namely theory, in historiography with grave consequences for methodology in history. Indeed, their rejection of transcendence was accompanied by the exclusion of the theoretical in favour of the 'factual', which became the fetish to which historiography had to be reduced. 'Facts' were not considered the result of a philosophical perspective, a point of view given by a specific methodological standpoint, but simply units within the changeless taxonomy of a scientifically conceived historical form of knowledge. Thus priority was given to statistics and history reduced to a prototype in which only quantitative, measurable 'facts' were admitted. The obsession with 'general laws' and

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p.281.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., pp.278-79.

<sup>80</sup> 'Il positivismo ... aveva di mira la metafisica dogmatica e trascendente, infiltratasi nel pensiero di Kant e nei suoi successori.' Ibid., p.280.



deterministic patterns left out other factors (particularly theoretical premises and narration) creating an unacceptable form of reductionism.

It is important to emphasize once again that Croce did not underestimate the achievements of the Positivist movement with his highlighting the pragmatic aspects of historiography neglected by the Romantics. He, nevertheless, indicated how the very nature of historiography, which he conceived as an open narrative free from any kind of determinism, could within a doctrinaire Positivism become an ossified scheme, another version of 'philosophy of history.' The uniqueness of the historical event, which required to be studied in its complexity, had been reduced to a mechanical plan. In the end Romanticism with Ideas, Positivism with Progress, developed the same dogmatic blueprint asphyxiating the historical dimension into a lifeless scheme.

We can now see how Croce's antimetaphysical method with its constant dialogue- polemic with the past allowed him to ascertain the grounds of a new sensibility in relation to history and its narrative. Moreover, Croce's analysis of Enlightenment, Romanticism and Positivism provides a good example of Croce's dynamic relation with past and tradition.

Since we are approaching the end of the section, it is time to summarize what has been acknowledged so far and draw some provisional conclusions on Croce's methodological approach to history.

Croce had always insisted on presenting history as an entirely immanent and open process. The result was a historiography, or historical narration, which rejected any reductionism or 'providentialism' and focused on the individuality of historical events. Within this perspective, the past was seen as a constant discovery which required unending re-articulation through the aesthetic, the logical, the economic and the ethical 'modes'. Tradition, with its rich depository of successive articulations of history and knowledge, plays a crucial role.

Thus, Croce's view, far from being the outcome of conservatism or Hegelian idealism, was dictated by the philosopher's hostility towards all grand systems of thought, including Hegel's philosophy, which obscured the openness of the historical process. This attention to the 'particular' in history was accompanied by a firm opposition to a priori constructions, whether Idealist or Positivist. Moreover, Croce

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.281.

showed through his analyses of Enlightenment, Romanticism and Positivism both the implicit reductionism and the transcendental tendencies inherent in these movements. However, these critiques did not imply an indiscriminate dismissal of the merits of the above-mentioned movements. Indeed, Croce saw in them the beginnings of modern thought.

It is astonishing to see how this cluster of philosophical questions on tradition, 'particularity', and reason, carefully analyzed by Croce, was transformed into a charge of woolly conservatism. In reality, it has been shown that in Croce's conception of history there is no opposition between 'traditional' and 'radical', since both are essential components of the same movement of regeneration and conservation.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> 'Certo, il ritmo della vita e della storia si svolge con quei due momenti, della conservazione e del progresso, e con la loro sintesi.' Croce, *Storia d'Italia*, p.22.

### 4.3 ETHICO-POLITICAL HISTORY

We have seen how *Teoria e storia* represented a breakthrough in Croce's reflections on history and historiography. Here the philosopher had summarized, expanded, and explained in detail his antimetaphysical method showing that history is an immanent, and open process inextricably linked to the present. Consequently, historical narrative was conceived as an *open dialogue* with the past through the means of the four 'modes' Croce had devised in his *Filosofia dello Spirito*. The result was a very broad historiographic programme in which the different dimensions of historical narration were distinguished in order to avoid any kind of reductionism. However, after analyzing the theoretical 'modes' in historical inquiries and the consequences for the historical narrative, Croce had to specify the particular nature of the relation of history with the present. The crucial question was: in what sense does contemporaneity shape our historical viewpoint? And also: how can we make sure that our account of history is an adequate one and not simply ideologically driven? Is there any way of escaping skepticism in historical narration? This cluster of questions arose in what Croce described as the ethico-political conception of history.

Of course, it is not purely coincidental that Croce started to explore the 'practical' dimensions of historiography around 1915, when uncertainty and cultural displacement occasioned by the First World War seemed to pervade the whole European continent. History became for Croce the terrain on which some fundamental problems of modernity could be addressed. Indeed, we have seen that according to the philosopher only engagement with past traditions and awareness of our fundamental historicity could provide answers for the present. In Croce, historiography had ceased to be a purely academic discipline and became more directly connected with the fabric of everyday life. It was in connection with this development that Croce drew out further implications of the ethico-political narrative dimension of historical writing.

This section considers how this ethico-political aspect of Croce's conception of history has often been misinterpreted in its theory and aims. The first part of the section is devoted to the relation between State, civil society, and government, and the second part to the role of the ethical 'mode' in Croce's conception of history. Indeed, we can divide Croce's ethico-political reflections into two phases, namely the one in which the philosopher concentrated on the relations between politics, power and civil

society with respect to history, and the other in which he stressed the ethical 'mode' as an essential part of our perceiving history and constructing historiography.

In the first phase there is in Croce an emphasis on the political aspect of history, particularly on the relations and tensions between civil society and state. Croce, inspired by Marx and Machiavelli, intended to analyze the mechanisms with which power is acquired and held. It will be shown how the charges of conservatism or proto-fascism levelled against the philosopher are spurious and often ideologically driven. In reality, the antimetaphysical method adopted by Croce, and his quest for a more open form of historiography was the genuine force behind his challenging analysis of ethics, politics, and power. In order to make my case I will use some suggestions from Gramsci who understood from the very beginning the importance of this new dimension for Croce's reflections on history.

In the second phase the emphasis is on the ethical aspect of historical narration. The advent of Fascism forced Croce to go beyond the purely political interpretation of history and explore in detail the implications of the ethical 'mode'. From this point, both politics and ethics became fundamental for historiography.

It is common to consider Croce's reflections on the ethico-political dimension of history as the definitive and *only* constituent of his 'historicism'. Indeed, for many critics the philosopher had readjusted all his previous ideas on history and historiography to embrace the ethico-political as history *par excellence*.<sup>83</sup> However, it will be shown that in Croce there is no ethico-political *system* and that this dimension is just one component, although an essential one, of his multifarious notion of history. If read in the proper context the ethico-political dimension adds another element to the complexity of historical narrative. Indeed, we have seen that for Croce history is expressed by an ever-open narrative. In reality, the ethico-political dimension does not amount to a sort of 'total history' which rises above particular ones. Such history, for the philosopher, would be vacuous. Croce, in conformity with his epistemological distinctions, intended simply to explore the practical 'modes', namely ethics and politics, in the light of his conception of the historical narrative.

We have already seen that Croce had talked about the role of 'interest' in historiography and analyzed with the help of Marxism the cluster of forces which

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<sup>83</sup> 'Only ethico-political history could provide the core of the culture's self-understanding, and thus it was history *par excellence*.' Roberts, *Benedetto Croce*, p.274.

shaped history and historiography. However, in the analysis carried out before the epistemological division into ‘modes’, there remained many unanswered questions.

Croce had formulated his epistemology in terms of ‘modes’ and analyzed the rhetorical and logical aspects of historiography. Indeed, in the introduction to *Teoria e storia*, written in 1916, he admitted that,

Il problema della comprensione storica è quello verso a cui tendevano le indagini da me condotte intorno ai modi dello spirito.<sup>84</sup>

Now Croce was interested in developing the *practical implications* of the study of history and the writing of historiography, namely in their connections with the ethical and political ‘modes’. There were political and moral dimensions to history which needed to be investigated further. Croce’s reflections on what we can call the ‘practical side’ of history were begun with a series of articles mostly published in *La Critica* from 1915 to 1931, later collected in a volume entitled *Etica e politica*. The work was initially published in three books: *Frammenti di etica*, first appearing in 1922 and expanded until 1931; *Elementi di politica*, published in 1925, and *Aspetti morali della vita politica*, appearing in 1928. These texts, together with Croce’s intellectual autobiography, *Contributo alla critica di me stesso*, later formed *Etica e politica*. As we can see from the morphology of the volume, we are not faced with one text, but rather a multifaceted work composed of different layers, which display the philosopher’s reflections on history and its connections with ethics and politics. Indeed, Croce underlined the ‘libero andamento’ of these writings specifying that they were not,

composti sopra un disegno ma suscitati via via dalle più varie occasioni dalla lettura di un poeta o di un filosofo, da un incidente politico, da un caso personale.<sup>85</sup>

This is a very important indication of Croce’s way of writing which did not follow a preconceived scheme but took up, so to speak, issues as they arose. Thus, it would be misleading to consider the ethico-political reflections in Croce as if they constituted a

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<sup>84</sup> Croce, *Teoria e storia*, p. iii.

<sup>85</sup> Croce, *Etica e politica*, p.15.

monolith. We can talk, instead, of a new series of enquiries into the nature of historiography.

Another element which needs to be mentioned is Croce's style. Indeed, the language of the essays was very plain; it avoided philosophical jargon and aimed to capture the attention of a larger audience. It consisted of the application of the principles he was theorizing in *Teoria e storia*. We have already seen that in Croce's mind philosophy does not deal with a quintessential, or metaphysical, problem but with particular issues as they arise and work themselves out in concrete historical situations. Thus, philosophical inquiry is important insofar as it provides a critical outlook on specific problems. Croce's reassessment of non-systematic philosophers like Machiavelli, Pascal and Vico worked in this direction.<sup>86</sup> There is no need for a 'fundamental question', which to him is always a metaphysical posture. Rather, we need to concentrate our attention on the problems which come from our engagement in the world. Consequently, philosophy was conceived as a critical clarification of everyday issues, not a theoretical construction of another linguistic universe separate from everyday language. In one of the *Frammenti di etica* Croce remarked:

l'aristocratismo del vero, ossia l'idea che il vero sia cosa estranea alle moltitudini umane, privilegio di pochi, se può dare gioia orgogliosa agli spiriti rozzi, egoistici ... e malinconia ai fini e delicati, che si vedono, per effetto della coscienza del vero, distaccati e straniati dagli altri uomini, e questi ridotti a volgo irredimibile e quasi animalesco, negli ingegni avveduti e critici suscita invece il dubbio, che l'affermato vero debba essere illusorio, appunto perché si presenta come possesso astrattamente individuale, senza legame, senza radici nella mente del genere umano.<sup>87</sup>

A good starting point for helping us to understand Croce's ethico-political conception in relation to history is provided by Gramsci in his *Quaderni*. Gramsci had immediately realized the importance of this notion in Croce and its repercussions in historiography. Indeed, the Marxist thinker remarked how Croce's view represented a reaction to a tendency in historiography to merge all the elements into the category of the economic:

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<sup>86</sup> See Croce, *Teoria e storia*, p.148.

<sup>87</sup> Croce, *Etica e politica*, p. 211.

La concezione storiografica del Croce della storia come storia etico politica non deve essere giudicata come una futilità da respingere senz'altro. Occorre invece fissare con grande energia che il pensiero storiografico del Croce, anche nella sua fase più recente, deve essere studiato e meditato con la massima attenzione. Esso rappresenta essenzialmente una reazione all'“economismo” e al meccanicismo fatalista.<sup>88</sup>

Analyzing Croce's view on Marxism we have seen that the philosopher did not underestimate the importance of economics as a concrete force which influences history. What Gramsci had perceived, however, was that Croce's efforts were directed at combating reductionist schemes, in this particular case the mechanistic Marxism of the Second International which the Communist intellectual also wished to defeat. More broadly, he could see that Croce's methodological approach to historical analysis, in dealing separately with its four 'modes', allowed him to relate the economic dimension to other elements of the historical process without reducing them to camouflaged expressions of the economic relations in society.

We have seen how Croce had already talked about the practical 'modes' (the ethical and the 'economic'<sup>89</sup>) in *Filosofia della pratica*. He maintained that ethics and politics are in dialectical relation, namely one implies the other. This means that they are *distinct* but related. Ethics had to be related to politics and vice versa, there is no 'pure' ethical or political view. However, the connection between the ethical and the political is a very complex matter. We know that for Croce moral conventions do not come from abstract principles of reason but are the result of a complex historical development and cannot be reduced to the economic 'mode'.<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, even the seemingly purest political-economic operation has its own ethical dimension. The ethical represented, for Croce, the general or 'universal' principles of a society,

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<sup>88</sup> A. Gramsci, *Il materialismo storico*, pp.250-51.

<sup>89</sup> It has already been argued that the category of the economic in Croce includes all disciplines which have a direct connection with practice. Croce also used the term 'l'Utile', the Useful, to describe them. The exact sciences and politics, as well as economics, are part of this category. The ethical in Croce is not limited to the category of 'utilità' although it is part of the practical 'modes' of the spirit. Ethics takes into account the general or 'universal' validity of values.

<sup>90</sup> 'La morale resterebbe un'astrattezza se non s'appoggiasse o alleasse a qualche forza vitale o interesse economico piegato a suo mezzo. Così l'alta spiritualità del cristianesimo lottò contro i barbari e a sé li sottomise, non già disarmata ... per la semplice virtù della bellezza morale ... ma anzi in quanto era armata di armi vitalmente, utilitariamente ... Senza queste e consimili armi il cristianesimo, nonostante la sua altezza morale, sarebbe rimasto praticamente impotente o in perpetua attesa di condizioni favorevoli, al pari di un'utopia.' Croce, *Il carattere*, pp. 240-41.

the political a particular set of rules to govern a given society<sup>91</sup>. Croce intended to underline how historical narration has to refer to an ethico-political horizon if it does not want to become anecdotal. Indeed, for the philosopher, history was not a *divertissement* and transcended the simple rhetorical and logical dimension. Thus, in focusing on the ethico-political element Croce was opposing the kind of historiography which reduced the complexity of the historical narration to a series of economic statements overlooking the relations with morality, politics and power. He was opposed, as we have seen, not only to the ‘metaphysical’ economism which reduces the whole of history to its material dimensions, but also to the untheorized empiricism of economic science, which, in its reduction of the economy to a series of fixed ‘laws’, refuses to acknowledge that the economic is a ‘human’ activity engaging values (the ethical ‘mode’).<sup>92</sup>

Moreover, Gramsci had immediately recognized the originality of this view when he identified the ethical element in Croce with civil society and the political one with the state:

L’avvicinamento dei due termini *etica e politica* per indicare la più recente storiografia crociana è l’espressione delle esigenze in cui si muove il pensiero storico crociano: l’etica si riferisce all’attività della società civile, la politica si riferisce all’iniziativa e alla coercizione statale-governativa.<sup>93</sup>

When we analyze history from the ethico-political point of view we take into account both these components. The dichotomy between *società civile* and *Stato* is an essential element in Croce’s historiography.

In 1924 he published *Elementi di politica* which represented the peak of his ethico-political reflections on history. In this particular period Croce focused on the forces which provided the political backbone of the State. This conception was very similar to that of the political theorist Gaetano Mosca. Indeed, in 1923 the philosopher had reviewed, in *La Critica*, Mosca’s *Elementi di scienza politica*. Here

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<sup>91</sup> ‘La coscienza etica e morale è coscienza di umanità e di totalità, la coscienza economica e politica è coscienza di parte o di interesse particolare.’ Croce, *Etica e politica*, p.205.

<sup>92</sup> These approaches, in the case of economics, were the two sides of the same coin, and lay behind Croce’s rejection of classical Liberalism as an economic doctrine, and were at the centre of his polemic with the Liberal economist Luigi Einaudi. The debate between Croce and Einaudi is now in P. Solari (ed.), *Liberismo e liberalismo* (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi, 1957).

<sup>93</sup> Gramsci, *Il materialismo storico*, p.240.



Croce maintained that the fundamental concept ‘necessario alla interpretazione della storia politica’ is ‘il concetto della classe politica o dirigente, nella quale è veramente riposta la vita politica dello Stato, classe, che quantitativamente è una minoranza, ma qualitativamente maggioranza perché sa e può.’<sup>94</sup>

Following a political tradition, which went back to Machiavelli, considered by the philosopher the founder of political philosophy,<sup>95</sup> Croce insisted on the *classe dirigente* as the main source of power in governing the State. Indeed, when we approach history with the ethico-political aspect,

Si tratta ... di vedere se presso un dato popolo o un dato periodo ci sia stata o no una classe dirigente, o meglio ( poiché una certa classe dirigente c'è sempre in ogni momento ... ), quale sia stata la coesione, la persistenza, il vigore, la fisionomia.<sup>96</sup>

Croce's strong sense of *realpolitik* was repeatedly interpreted as inherently conservative and we have seen how it was used by post-war progressive cultural forces and also in Togliatti's political strategy. More recently an otherwise balanced account on 20th century Italian ideologies, Bedeschi's *La fabbrica delle ideologie*, suggested that Croce's thought was a sort of precursor of Fascism<sup>97</sup>. However, Croce's was an investigation into the complex relations between ethics and politics rather than a mere ideological posture. Indeed, for Croce, as for Mosca, there is an inherent tendency in the political organization of society for control to be exercised by minority groups. This position, which is neutral taken per se, has often been used to accuse Croce of political conservatism. However, he is simply pointing to the fact that in any society a minority will tend to assume a guiding role. Even in the most democratic systems there is an elite which guides, manoeuvres and manipulates a majority. Thus we should talk about ‘realism’ rather than conservatism in Croce's position.

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<sup>94</sup> Croce, *Nuove pagine sparse*, vol. II (Naples: Ricciardi, 1949), p.168. The review first appeared in *La Critica*, xxi (1923), ‘Gaetano Mosca, *Elementi di politica*’, pp.374-78.

<sup>95</sup> ‘È risaputo che il Machiavelli scopre la necessità e l'autonomia della politica, della politica che è di là, o piuttosto di qua, dal bene e dal male morale, che ha le sue leggi a cui è vano ribellarsi, che non si può esorcizzare e cacciare dal mondo con l'acqua benedetta. È questo il concetto che circola in tutta l'opera sua e che quantunque non vi sia formulato con quella esattezza didascalica e scolastica che sovente si scambia per filosofia ... è da dire nondimeno concetto profondamente filosofico, e rappresenta la vera e propria fondazione di una filosofia della politica. Croce, *Etica e politica*, p.292.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.164.

Moreover, in Croce, the elites are not only political but they include intellectuals and artists. Hence, political elites are never totally separate from the rest of society. Furthermore, for the philosopher, they do not simply impose their will on the people. Indeed, their being in power depends on the moral, cultural, and intellectual life of a given society which is shaped by thinkers, intellectuals and writers as much as by politicians. In other words, by 'classe dirigente' Croce meant a group of people who are aware of the cultural, moral, and intellectual life of a given society and actively operate to maintain, improve or destroy it. Indeed, ethico-political history considered

non solo lo Stato e il governo dello Stato, e l'espansione dello Stato, ma anche ciò che è anche fuori dello Stato, sia che cooperi con esso, sia che si sforzi di modificarlo, rovesciarlo, sostituirlo: la formazione degli istituti morali nel più largo senso, compresi gli istituti religiosi e le sette rivoluzionarie, compresi i sentimenti e le fantasie e i miti di tendenze e contenuto pratico.<sup>98</sup>

We can see from this quotation how open Croce was to the different forces operating in history. Furthermore, we can see how misleading it is to simply select what he said about elites and infer from this a conservative politics. His theory of history is not a theorization of society's 'legitimate' authorities. As we can see, it takes into account a variety of forces, including the revolutionary and seditious.<sup>99</sup> This is an aspect of Croce's approach which needs further investigation. For the philosopher history is not about the legitimation of the *status quo* as many of his detractors have maintained.<sup>100</sup> It is a mistake, then, to assume that Croce adopts a negatively moralistic attitude towards forces outside society's 'legitimate' structures.

Gramsci realized the novelty of this position and would use Croce's reflections on politics to elaborate his concepts of 'hegemony' and 'organic intellectual'. For the Marxist thinker, with this approach it was possible to appreciate

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<sup>97</sup> For Bedeschi in Croce 'c'era un vero e proprio culto della forza, e dello scontro tra forze, come legge suprema, e starei a dire sublime, della vita e della storia.' G. Bedeschi, *La fabbrica delle ideologie*, p. 106.

<sup>98</sup> Croce, *Etica e politica*, p. 219.

<sup>99</sup> 'Quando c'è contrasto tra etica e politica, tra esigenze della libertà ed esigenze della forza, tra società civile e Stato-governo c'è crisi e il Croce giunge ad affermare che il vero "Stato", cioè la forza direttiva dell'impulso storico occorre talvolta cercarlo, non là dove si crederebbe, nello "Stato" giuridicamente inteso, ma nelle forze private e anche nei così detti rivoluzionari.' Gramsci, *Il materialismo storico*, p.240.

the importance of the cultural dimension and the function of leading intellectuals. Moreover, the above-mentioned approach provided a tool for examining the process through which hegemony is established in society:

Il pensiero del Croce ... ha energicamente attirato l'attenzione sull'importanza dei fatti di cultura e di pensiero nello sviluppo della storia, sulla funzione dei grandi intellettuali nella vita organica della società civile e dello Stato, sul momento dell'egemonia e del consenso come forma necessaria del blocco storico concreto.<sup>101</sup>

However, whereas Croce's aim was to investigate the role of politics in the light of history, Gramsci was more concerned to provide a political diagnosis of society. Thus, we can maintain that for Gramsci the historical dimension is a *function* of the political one, whereas in Croce *history* is the centre of gravity and politics an important function of it. Indeed, we have already explained that we cannot reduce the complexity of the historical account to the political. Croce himself warned against the misuse of his reflections on the political aspects of history when Fascism tried to use them for its ideological purposes, as the following extract from his *Taccuini* shows:

La sera è venuto Prezzolini ... Cercando un alibi per se stesso, mi ha chiesto il permesso di dirmi liberamente che del fascismo io sono tra i principali responsabili. E il perchè sarebbe che ho sostenuto la teoria che lo stato e la politica è forza. Gli ho risposto che sostengo anche oggi questa teoria, ma che interpretarla a quel modo sarebbe come interpretare la legge della caduta dei gravi per la libera verticale per un consiglio alla gente di gettarsi a capo in giù dalla finestra.<sup>102</sup>

Indeed, the idea that the State, government and political society represent the element of 'coercion' in society is a universally accepted principle of all political doctrines with the exception of anarchism. It is in Croce's ethical 'mode' that analysis of how this 'coercive' element is applied (seeking consensus, aggressively, for the general good, for the benefit of an elite, etc.) is taken up. But Prezzolini's comments are a

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<sup>100</sup> Alberto Asor Rosa maintained that Croce 'forniva un'ideologia per la classe dominante.' *Storia d'Italia*, vol.vi . Pt. II, *La cultura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), p.1535.

<sup>101</sup> Gramsci, *Il materialismo storico*, p.251. This passage shows, in my view, how crucial Croce's ethico-political analysis was for Gramsci. For a very convincing analysis on the influence of Croce on Gramsci see also R. Bellamy, 'A Crocean critique of Gramsci on historicism, hegemony and intellectuals', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 6 (2001), pp. 209-229.

<sup>102</sup> B. Croce, *Taccuini di lavoro* (Naples: Arte Tipografica, 1987), p.488. The passage is dated 21<sup>st</sup> June 1935.

good illustration of how Croce's 'modes', conceived as tools for clarifying different historiographical dimensions, could equally be approached with a conservative or radical standpoint since they had no *direct* political implications.<sup>103</sup> It would be foolish to deny the 'political' applications of Croce's thought. Indeed, one can accept that his reflections on politics were often used as an ideological tool for 'conservative' or even reactionary purposes, but one cannot reduce its theoretical and critical complexity to a political posture which the philosopher aimed to avoid. In other words, we should distinguish between Croce's historiographical insights and perspectives, and the way in which they were ideologically presented and often exploited by others. We have already seen when we analyzed Croce's 'deconstruction' of Marxism that his aim was not political. Croce's way of doing 'politics' was to work as a critic and scholar:

Nel lavorare alla Critica, mi si formò la tranquilla coscienza, di ritrovarmi al mio posto, di dare il meglio di me, e di compiere opera politica, di politica in senso lato; opera di studioso e di cittadino insieme.<sup>104</sup>

Moreover, the philosopher had always insisted on the instrumental value of political parties and the relativity of either a conservative or a radical position:

C'è chi sente che il suo ufficio sociale è di conservatore, e chi sente che è di rivoluzionario, chi di liberista chi di antiliberista ... chi di tollerante chi d'intollerante, e via dicendo, anche variando, secondo le circostanze. Senza dubbio, accade che ciascuno predichi il suo fare come di valore assoluto: illusione, utile, in certi limiti, ma che presto si dissiperebbe ... o si convertirebbe nel contrario, se tutti facessero come lui.<sup>105</sup>

In an article which appeared in Salvemini's *L'Unità* in 1912 Croce had demonstrated his skepticism in relation to political parties as possessors of 'truth' or 'justice'. Instead, he conceived of them as simple coalitions with a limited role to play

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<sup>103</sup> It has rightly been pointed out that in the philosopher, 'Il modo vocazionale e autentico di fare politica era nel fare cultura, nel determinare attraverso la cultura moti e reazioni della coscienza morale del paese, mentalità e idee della classe dirigente, orientamenti ed entusiasmi dei giovani intellettuali ... E in ciò non agivano tanto presunzioni, certezze, preoccupazioni, tradizioni di classe ... [quanto] una reale convinzione circa la propria vocazione e le proprie attitudini.' Galasso, *Croce e o spirito del suo tempo*, p.131.

<sup>104</sup> Croce, *Contributo*, p. 32.

<sup>105</sup> Croce, *Etica e politica* p. 224.

in society.<sup>106</sup> Here, political effectiveness was clearly distinguished from morality.

Indeed he warned readers to

non darsi troppo pensiero della signora Democrazia o del signor Socialismo, tanto difficili a definire in idea, quanto, per quel che sembra, difficili a trovare impersonati nella realtà della presente vita italiana; e di badare a trattare questioni *determinate e concrete*, secondo gli ottimi saggi di ciò che hanno dato.<sup>107</sup>

Following the advent of Fascism his emphasis on the ethical 'mode' became increasingly important. The attempt by Fascist intellectuals to rewrite history in the light of the victorious 'Marcia su Roma' and invalidate the importance of recent Italian history forced Croce to specify and partly reorientate his conception of historiography. The target of the dictatorship was the beginning of the Italian state, the *Risorgimento* in particular, but also the whole pre-Fascist era up to Giolitti. The ideological purpose was to present an 'Italietta' by contrast with the alleged greatness of the new Fascist era. In this context Croce advocated greater scrutiny of the moral dimension in order to avoid a gross distortion of this period. The problem of a 'true' view of history was now strongly linked with the 'moral motivations' underlying the historical narrative.

Perhaps the most important document in this new attention to the ethical dimension is the letter that Croce addressed to Charles Beard, distinguished historian and head of the American Association of History:

La vita del pensiero storico è strettamente congiunta con la vita intellettuale e morale ... il risanamento e il progresso dell'una tira con sé il risanamento e il progresso dell'altra ... Considerata più specialmente come la storia di atti morali e pratici, essa è storia dell'*ethos umano* la quale io ho proposto di definire *etico-politica* per far intendere che, diversamente dalla mera storia politica, ha il suo

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<sup>106</sup> 'I partiti sono necessari, ma necessari nella propria cerchia, come *derivazione* e non come *scaturigine* dell'azione politica, come *conseguenza* e non come *premessa*.' Croce, 'Il partito come giudizio e pregiudizio', in *Cultura e vita morale*, p.197. Galasso has explained this point with clarity: 'Appunto in quanto ... presumevano di essere portatori di valori che potevano invece risultare dall'insieme del processo storico, i partiti politici erano teorizzati da Croce come pregiudizio. Che poteva essere una filosofia gradevole al trasformismo, ma poteva egualmente alimentare una volontà rivoluzionaria di rinnovamento a destra e a sinistra; ed è con questa latitudine di possibilità di influenza, oltre che per il suo intimo significato, così ben corrispondente alla fase di evoluzione della cultura italiana in quel tempo, che si spiega la eccezionale diffusione subito guadagnata dal pensiero crociano in tante parti della cultura italiana di allora, dai giovani ... della "Voce" ai quelli che poi faranno l' "Ordine Nuovo".' Galasso, *Croce e lo spirito*, p.245.

<sup>107</sup> Croce, 'Il partito come giudizio e pregiudizio', pp.197-98.

centro nella coscienza morale, e ... include la politica, l'economia, e ogni altra forma dell'attività pratica.<sup>108</sup>

The letter is fundamental for understanding Croce's position, and for clarifying in what sense the ethical 'mode' in history became crucial for the philosopher.

Firstly, Croce drew attention to the relation between the historical output of a culture and the intellectual climate in which this is produced. We already know that for our philosopher historians are not isolated and detached observers of historical events. On the contrary, their work is inextricably linked with the time and society in which they work. Hence, the historian approaches history with a baggage of 'pre-conceptions'. Any analysis of the ideas, values and customs of an epoch is always presented from a particular standpoint, or ideology to use the Marxist terminology. However, in Croce the ideological element is only one element of our pre-conceptions, the other being the ethical. In other words, in the philosopher we have a distinction between ideology and morality which is not present in Marx. For Croce we cannot reduce the ideological to the ethical.

Another characteristic worth noticing is the *non-reductive function* of the ethical 'mode'. Indeed the letter to Beard shows clearly that to focus on the ethical aspects of historiography does not imply the neglect of the other components, namely, 'politica, economia e tutte le forme dell'attività pratica.' Thus we cannot maintain that the philosopher, in considering the importance of the ethical mode, was excluding other elements. Also, Croce specified that a 'moral', or ethico-political dimension in history should not be confused with a moralistic one:

Senza dubbio, riaffermati il diritto e l'esigenza della storia morale, altrettanto urgente è determinarne esattamente il contenuto, e soprattutto discernere da una sua forma falsa, che l'ha ... discredita. Intendo quella che si dovrebbe chiamare non storia morale ma *moralistica*, perché scambia e confonde l'atteggiamento del moralista con l'altro, totalmente diverso, dello storico.<sup>109</sup>

In Croce the ethico-political stance represented a deep-level characteristic of all human history, and should not be confined to the 'storia della vita morale':

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<sup>108</sup> Croce, *Epistolario I*, p. 173. The letter is dated 24th June 1933.

<sup>109</sup> Croce, *Etica e politica*, p.320. Italics mine.

La storia della vita morale o civile che si dica di un popolo ... questa sola *sembra* la sola senz'altro, la storia per eccellenza; e ci sono buoni motivi perchè sembri così, quantunque la cosa non sia poi ... così, *non potendosi concepire alcuna forma di storia che sovraneggi fra le altre.*<sup>110</sup>

In all historical narrations, for Croce, there is an ethico-political element which transcends the purely ideological one. Every historian starts his or her research with a set of values which, in one way or another, find their way to the narrative process. They are not to be equated with ideological or political positions, but are more akin to modes of cognition or sensibility, in the sense that they form value-laden dispositions which can be found in protagonists of left or right-wing ideologies. The ethical 'mode', therefore is akin to such a disposition or sensibility, and enters the interpretation of historical events as a mode of perception. Even the Marx of *Capital*, despite his claiming to write an 'objective' examination of the proletariat, had an ethico – political thrust which automatically produced a sympathetic view of the working class as the essential element for building a fairer society. Croce, through the ethical 'mode', aimed to avoid the risk of falling into an implausible form of historical narration such as the purely materialistic one in which everything is reduced to the economic, or the racist one where history becomes the expression of a privileged race elected by nature:

una storia così intesa ... e coltivata libererà da due false storiografie che hanno avuto molta fortuna negli ultimi cinquanta anni e oggi si fanno sentire dappertutto, e, in alcuni paesi non solo predominano ma dominano senza rivali. Dico la concezione materialistica della storia e la concezione etnica o razzistica: la prima delle quali nega i valori ideali e morali e li considera come semplici maschere degli interessi economici; e la seconda li nega parimenti sostituendoli con pretesi valori naturalistici ... Sono due forme di ottusità storiografica che bisogna perseguire non tanto allorché si presentano nella loro pienezza dottrinale di affermazione e di applicazione (perché in questi casi il loro assunto è evidente), ma nelle loro conseguenze meno appariscenti e più insidiose, nelle disposizioni intellettuali che hanno ingenerato, nei pregiudizi che hanno introdotto e coi quali sviano e infiacchiscono il pensiero e contaminano i racconti dei libri storici.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p.318. Italics mine.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

It has to be stressed once again that Croce, in drawing attention to ethico-political history, did not wish to promote moralistic forms of history. The task of historians is not to discriminate between good or bad actions, which is a moralistic act. There is a crucial difference in Croce between the moralist and the historian:

Il moralista infatti è un ... censore, che mira a tener saldo e inflessibile l'ideale morale ... esaminando la correttezza delle singole azioni e la maggiore o minore bontà dei singoli individui. Ma lo storico non bada alle serie delle belle azioni moralmente ispirate ed eseguite ... quanto al carattere delle azioni compiute e al significato che esse prendono nello svolgimento storico.<sup>112</sup>

If historians cease to investigate 'il carattere' and 'il significato' of the events there is no history but *chronicle*, which represents a non-critical account of events, and the very significance of the discipline is completely lost.

Hence, the ethico-political component is an essential element of any 'true' narration of events, which also requires the rhetorical, logical and economic to be complete. The 'modes' are distinct, each with their own disciplines and requirements, and the precise calibration of their respective weight in the narrative will depend upon the nature and the requirements of the historical period or events under scrutiny.

From all that has been maintained above, we can see that for Croce the ethico-political dimension of history was not necessarily an element which was palpably apparent in the narration on the surface of the text, although we will see that at any particular stage in a nation's development this might become crucial. Moreover, it is also evident that the readings which have labeled Croce's historicism as fundamentally conservative have really missed the genuine theoretical thrust and complexity of his discourse.

Another source of misunderstanding, connected with Croce's alleged reactionary position, is his claim that history is always 'positive'. Indeed in *Teoria e storia* Croce had stated that,

Un fatto che sembri meramente cattivo, un'epoca che sembri di mera decadenza non può essere altro che un fatto *non storico*, vale a dire non ancora storicamente elaborato, non penetrato dal pensiero, e rimasto in preda al sentimento e all'immaginazione.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p.320-21.

<sup>113</sup> Croce, *Teoria e storia*, p. 65.



The above extract does not suggest that all events are good, or that historians justify all atrocities in history with a sort of inert fatalism. Croce would say that, in this respect history is closer to tragedy than idyll.<sup>114</sup> It simply points to the fact that historical events have to be approached in their genesis and consequences without moralism.<sup>115</sup> Hence, historical events taken in themselves are ‘positive’, namely subject to a convincing explanation which requires an articulated epistemological framework aiming to avoid reductionism. Historical experiences such as the Inquisition, for example, might well tempt the contemporary historian to garnish his narrative with expressions of abhorrence, disgust, and even indignation.<sup>116</sup> To Croce, such expressions would be moralizing ‘intrusions’ in the historian’s work rather than the serious application of the ethical ‘mode’. The latter would require an analysis of the general sensibility of the period, the location of the phenomenon in this setting, etc., leading to an understanding of the ‘logic’ of the events in the overall historical picture. An evaluation of the ethical climate of the period, and an assessment of the phenomenon in this context, moreover, is more likely to contribute to an understanding of how we have arrived at our own standards of morality than are the judgemental comments of the ‘committed’ historian. In this sense, all historical events are ‘positive’ in so far as they have contributed, in one way or another to the present.

Thus, ‘positivity’ in history does not imply the preference of specific historical facts to the detriment of others; it rather focuses on the need to find a valid elucidation of historical events. Indeed, our understanding the historical process in its complexity is one thing, but is our *moral response* to the events in which we are taking part is quite another. Consequently, Croce maintained that

L’azione pratica non si deduce da alcuna teoria ... Se l’azione pratica o politica fosse conseguenza di una teoria tutti dovrebbero operare per lo stesso verso, come tutti debbono accogliere una proposizione scientificamente stabilita ... Alla vanitosa prosunzione di possedere la

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<sup>114</sup>‘Tutto il peggio del peggior passato può sempre tornare, sebbene torni in condizioni nuove ... l’epopea della storia è più vicina alla tragedia che all’idillio. Il non aver ben meditato questa verità, e l’essersi lasciati andare a quel fatuo e pericoloso ottimismo, è la principale cagione del presente pessimismo e della presente sfiducia, che innanzi alle difficoltà sopraggiunte ... invece di disfarsi delle proprie illusioni e correggere la propria leggerezza, non trova miglior partito che di disfarsi dell’ideale stesso e rimanere ... in una sorta di stupefazione, che rende l’uomo preda delle forze che gli turbinano intorno.’ Croce, *Il carattere*, p. 119.

<sup>115</sup> The contradiction between this open perspective and Croce’s famous evaluation of Fascism as a ‘disease’ which is not part of the historical ‘DNA’ of Italy will be discussed in the next section.

<sup>116</sup> See Croce, *Filosofia della pratica*, pp. 363-65 and 404-05.

verità politica bisogna sostituire negli animi l'umile coscienza di rappresentare la parte che la voce interiore ci comanda.<sup>117</sup>

Furthermore, the 'positivity' of history also poses the question of the grading of historical events in terms of 'importance'. The discrimination between relevant and irrelevant event, we have already seen, depends on the concerns and the priorities of our present. Since history is an open process defined by the 'interests' of the present, one cannot define aprioristically what is of historical significance and what is not. Croce would reiterate this point in *Il carattere della filosofia moderna* where he maintained:

La storiografia conosce volta per volta, nell'individualità del fatto che ricostruisce e giudica ... e volta per volta dà e scema rilievo, colloca in primi e secondi piani e distribuisce luci e ombre come adopera l'artista.<sup>118</sup>

Historiography changes when the needs and interests of the society change, thus the problem, 'è per lei [la storiografia] non di separazione e distacco di certi fatti, ma di *prospettiva*.'<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Croce, *Cultura e vita morale*, p.247.

<sup>118</sup> Croce, *Il carattere*, p. 260.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. Italics mine.

#### 4.4 CROCE'S HISTORIOGRAPHY (NAPLES, ITALY, AND EUROPE)

Having examined Croce's theory of history in the years between the First World War and the consolidation of the Fascist regime, we can now turn our attention to Croce's historical output. We will discuss here some of what are generally reputed to be his major works, namely *Storia del Regno di Napoli* (first published 1925), *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915* (published in 1926), and *Storia d'Europa del XIX secolo* (published in 1932) in relation to Croce's philosophical views on historiography.

We are fortunate in having in Croce not only a thinker who wrote extensively on the theoretical issues associated with historical writing, but also a practitioner of the craft. His historical writings have not, however, always been seen as a straight application of his theoretical views. A further problem is that these disjunctures were seen in relation to questionable conceptions of what Croce's theoretical views actually were. Croce himself, however, had begun his speculations on the nature of history in order to clarify his concrete research as a scholar of local history first and then of Italy and Europe. The aim of this section is to examine the issue of the relationship between Croce's theory of history and his own historiographical output. It will be shown, for example, that, despite some undeniable limitations, Croce's works on history display many aspects which have often been overlooked. We will find once, for example, that the frequent charge of conservatism does not do justice to the complexity of these works. This is not, however, to deny that there were tensions between Croce's historical theory and its practice in the field of historiography.

One eminent historian who in some ways overrated the disjuncture between theory and practice in Croce's historiography was Federico Chabod, the first director of the *Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici*, founded by Croce a few months before his death. Chabod wrote what can be regarded as a seminal study on the major historical works of Croce, with an article appearing in 1952, just after the philosopher's death, entitled 'Croce storico'. He maintained that Croce's historical works were relevant *despite* their philosophical premises. In other words, for Chabod, we need to distinguish between Croce the philosopher of history, or metaphysician, who speculated about the final meaning of the discipline, and Croce as a 'practical' historian who had a strong sense of reality. Croce's best historical works are, according to Chabod, the ones which have a stronger feel for historical detail and for the place of the individual in history. He found that Croce had had an *instinctive sense* of history:

Prima ancora che nell'elaborazione concettuale, questo senso del passato, cioè della storia egli lo aveva per così dire d'istinto, nel sangue.<sup>120</sup>

Thus, in assessing Croce's historiography Chabod selected as successful the moments in which

lo svolgimento storico [è] colto e fermato nelle figure, maggiori e minori, che di quello svolgimento sono attori, vivi attori, e in esso apportano ... qualcosa di personale.<sup>121</sup>

The *Storia del Regno di Napoli*, for instance, according to Chabod, was written with great attention to the human element in history, 'di continuo creata dagli uomini, vivi ciascuno nella propria umanità.'<sup>122</sup> Here Croce had managed to 'ricreare uomini vivi, corpi e anime individuali, che nel procedimento generale della storia stampano la propria inconfondibile orma ed imprimono il proprio personale dramma.'<sup>123</sup> Also in *Storia d'Italia*, for Chabod 'la storia è riposta negli uomini e nelle loro coscienze.'<sup>124</sup>

Since Chabod liked attention to detail in historical narration he found *Storia dell'età barocca* and Croce's historical biographies<sup>125</sup> very significant with their attention to 'la storia dei sentimenti, della vita spirituale e della vita morale.'<sup>126</sup> Indeed, Chabod maintained that 'la nota iniziale, caratteristica del gusto delle cose umane rimarrà costante fino all'ultimo, e grazie ad essa Croce scriverà le sue pagine più alte.'<sup>127</sup> Thus, in Chabod's interpretation,

a mantenere in altezza la storiografia crociana evitandole di cadere nell'astrattezza intellettualistica, è, anzitutto, quel senso del particolare umano di cui si è detto, così profondo e possente in Croce dalla prima alla più tarda età.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> F. Chabod, 'Croce storico', *Rivista storica italiana*, iv (1952), pp. 473-530, (p. 473).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p.488.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 491-92.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p.492.

<sup>125</sup> All Croce's historical biographies are about women: Lucrezia D'Alagno, Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel, Luisa Sanfelice and Giulia Gonzaga, now in *Vite di avventure, di fede e di passione*, (Bari: Laterza, 1936).

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p.498.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p.499.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p.505.

Nevertheless, for Chabod, Croce's weakest book was *La Storia d'Europa*, since it did not portray in a vivid manner the characters and protagonists of nineteenth century Europe, and lapsed into abstraction. Here, the 'spiritual' and 'moral forces' existed in a sort of 'other world' separated from everyday life.<sup>129</sup>

Chabod's analysis has had an enormous influence on the interpretation of Croce's work and established the tone of the debate about the originality and limitation of Croce's theory of history. In Chabod's view, on the one hand there was the 'Hegelian Croce' with his uncanny and rather outmoded philosophy of the spirit; on the other, there was 'Croce the historian' whose 'instinct', attention to detail, and 'sense of reality' made him produce 'good historiography'.

However, Chabod did not altogether give due weight to the *complexity* of Croce's position. As a practising historian, with an unwavering empiricist faith in 'historical reality' which could be 'objectively' grasped, he found Croce's reflections on history 'abstract' and almost dangerous for the stability of the profession. That is why he saw Croce's theory of history with suspicion:

In realtà, mentre Croce sino al 1929 ammette ancora, almeno nel giudizio storico concreto, un problema storico in sé, successivamente accentua sempre più il 'problema' che lo storico si pone.<sup>130</sup>

What Chabod perceived as dangerous 'metaphysical speculations' were in reality *fundamental issues* which questioned the very core of historical inquiry and its function. We have seen how thoroughly Croce analyzed the different issues relating to history and historical narration and how he constructed a flexible epistemology in order to avoid any kind of reductionism. In reality, Croce's inquiry on the nature of historical knowledge was never, not even in its earliest phase, abstract speculation. What Chabod identified as a regrettable mixture between (idealist) philosophy and history was precisely the original core of Croce's thought which was not, as we have shown in the previous chapters, a metaphysical attempt to encase reality in the straightjacket of a 'philosophy of history'. On the contrary, Croce aimed to question

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p.493.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p.511.

the image of a grand, unified single historical narrative, drawing attention to the various elements which constitute narrative and history.<sup>131</sup>

Although Chabod may have been right to claim that there was a tension between Croce's theory of history and the actual historiography, this did not exist in quite the terms expressed by Chabod. From our point of view, after having analyzed Croce's reflections, we are quite disappointed to see that his innovative and open-ended views were not followed by a radically different form of historical narrative. Croce's historical works appear more traditionally cast and more 'cautious' in form than his epistemology lead one to expect. Nevertheless, one can show that, despite the traditional stamp of Croce's historiography, in the final analysis the tension between his theory and historiography is not as dramatic as it seems.

First, an element that has not been sufficiently explored in analyzing Croce's historical works is the *particular period* in which these histories were written. As Hayden White put it, Croce

never intended his works to be read *in vacuo*. Most of his historical productions were collections of lectures or occasional pieces that had been delivered and were meant to be heard in special social situations.<sup>132</sup>

Indeed, it is not a coincidence that all Croce's major historical works were conceived and published under the Fascist dictatorship, more precisely between 1925 and 1932 when Fascism was establishing a totalitarian regime. These years coincided with Croce's activity as the leader of the senatorial opposition to Mussolini before Fascism became completely dictatorial. To Croce, in an attempt to give Fascism historical validation, Mussolini and his entourage were recasting fundamental aspects of Italian and modern European history. New emphasis on the 'glorious past' of Italy, and consequent historiographical misrepresentation were the unavoidable outcome. Inaugurating a trend typical of all totalitarian regimes, Fascism isolated the elements of the past which were functional to its propaganda, providing an oversimplified and often distorted version of history. Thus, as scholar and citizen, Croce felt the need to

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<sup>131</sup> Recently a scholar, probably inspired by Chabod's interpretation, has defined 'La storia di Croce' as 'espressiva innanzi tutto di un'idea filosofica, essendo fortemente condizionata da motivi teoretici.' R. Ajello, 'Croce e la storia meridionale' in AA. VV., *Croce quarant'anni dopo* (Pescara-Sulmona: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Crociani, 1993), p.373. This view on Croce betrays a blatant naivety about the profession and aims of the historian, who is seen as a sort of archivist of the 'facts' of history.

<sup>132</sup> White, 'The abiding influence of Croce', p.121.

'rectify' the records and find a solid historical foundation for the *values* of the young democratic society that Fascism had crushed. Indeed, in 1927, talking about his *Storia d'Italia*, Croce reported in his *Taccuini*:

I legami di questa storia con il presente mi hanno portato a meditare e fantasticare dolorosamente sul presente e sull'avvenire. Mi costa uno sforzo penoso attendere alla storia che mi sono proposto di scrivere come dovere da adempiere verso i miei connazionali.<sup>133</sup>

In Croce's view, this 'dovere verso i miei connazionali' did not involve betraying the historiographical methodology he had so far theorized, nor did it require the 'committed' kind of historical narrative of which he had up to now been critical for wearing its values on its sleeve. In a period of such mobilized cultural distortion it was a mistake to respond with distortions in the opposite direction. As Gramsci had also come to recognize, there are periods during which simply 'telling the truth is a revolutionary act.' There were, in other words, moments in history in which the normal activities even of the intellectual appear militant and subversive. Tyranny requires a polemical frame of mind to sustain the telling of truths which would in different times be innocent.

These points were made by Croce himself in an autobiographical postscript added to his *Contributo alla critica di me stesso* in October 1934, later collected in *Etica e politica*. He indicates that his historical and philosophical writings, written in a spirit of analytical rigour, have been given a new meaning by the times themselves:

Gli studi per sé stessi, anche quelli che paiono distaccati dalla pratica, come il gusto per la poesia o la diligenza nell'indagine filologica, hanno sempre il potere di introdurre negli animi qualcosa di universale, che contrasta e tempera l'esclusiva caccia delle utilità immediate. Ma da allora i miei lavori filosofici e storici, senza cessar di essere severamente scientifici, perché mi sarei vergognato di abbassarli a strumento di partito o di contaminarli con tendenze pratiche, e, del resto, così facendo ne avrei inaridito in me la sorgente, si mossero con maggiore e più rapida corrispondenza che per l'innanzi, secondo le nuove esigenze che la coscienza morale poneva e per apportarle la luce che essa domandava. Ciò si vede nei libri dei quali ho fatto di sopra ricordo, segnatamente nei saggi sui concetti politici e nelle storie che sono venute componendo, le quali, ideate già prima della guerra, dai nuovi eventi riceverono un'accentuazione che prima non avrebbero

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<sup>133</sup> Croce, *Taccuini*, 8 July 1927, p.28.

avuto, oltrech  una chiaroveggenza di certi processi che prima non sarebbe stata altrettanto limpida.<sup>134</sup>

But his insistence on analytical rigour has been misunderstood by opponents of Fascism who, in Croce's view, wished to combat its distortions through the assertions of a 'politicismo' which would conscript the work of the scholars to the 'class interests' of their own ideology:

Non sempre questo intento che ha guidato il mio lavoro   stato compreso da coloro stessi che sono nel campo dell'opposizione, perch  molti di essi recano nel sangue lo stesso politicismo che   nei loro avversari e stimano assai poco l'importanza della vita religiosa e morale e della filosofia e della critica, e continuano a pensare la storia come cieca lotta di interessi economici e sopraffazione compiuta ora da uno ora da un altro partito o classe.<sup>135</sup>

Such considerations are something of a dramatic illustration of the hermeneutical point we shall return to later in relation to the interpretation of history; namely the history (and philosophy) are constantly being reinterpreted and seen according to the perspectives of the epoch during which the analysis is undertaken.

If we return to Croce's *Storia d'Italia* we find a heightened consciousness of the fact in the writer himself that a 'dovere verso i connazionali' was its driving force. Undoubtedly, Croce gave a positive account of the first forty years of the newly constituted nation state. He called attention to the merits of usually unpopular politicians such as De Pretis and Giolitti<sup>136</sup> and described the development of Italian socialism and the cultural ferment of the beginning of the twentieth century with great sympathy. However, the 'praise' of pre-Fascist Italian political life should be put into context. We have already mentioned Croce's polemic with Fascism and its reading of the *Risorgimento* and early democratic Italy as 'Italietta' allegedly humiliated by the international treaties after the Great War. Democracy, along with demagogy and corruption, were reviled as opposed to the 'order' established by Mussolini's regime,

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<sup>134</sup> B. Croce, 'Note autobiografiche', *Etica e politica*, pp. 357-73 (pp.369-70).

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p.370.

<sup>136</sup> 'Giolitti is singled out for having adopted ... [a] spirit of accommodation when ruling the country, and his hated policy of *trasformismo* praised accordingly ... He is favourably compared with Crispi, who sought to provide a social consensus through abortive schemes for imperial expansion, whilst repressing political expression by socialists and liberals at home. In contrast Giolitti attempted to involve groups previously excluded from politics, and defuse both nationalism and Marxism.' R. Bellamy, *Modern Italian social theory. Ideology and Politics from Pareto to the Present*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp.91-2.



the real hero of the modern Italian state. According to Fascism, Italy had failed to accomplish its mission of promoting for itself a new role among international powers. In reality Fascism, in Croce's interpretation, was undermining the very existence of the Italian state. Thus, Croce's aim was to show his countrymen that the past fifty years were a real turning point for the development of a modern Italy. It was during this period that the Italian state had begun to develop its basic democratic structures and institutions. The economic, social, and political situation of the Italian kingdom was, for the philosopher, rich in positive and constructive changes despite its inexperience by comparison with the major European states.

The tone of Croce's *Storia d'Italia* was deliberately polemical, a component which has often been underplayed despite the overwhelming amount of evidence available. Indeed, in a letter to the scholar Lombardo Radice, Croce wrote:

Lo spirito civile ... ha sempre riscaldato l'anima mia ... La verità è, che nei tempi di calma i pratici curano la pratica e gli studiosi gli studi. Nei tempi di crisi i pratici si smarriscono o vengono eliminati, e gli uomini di studio assumono la parte di critici.<sup>137</sup>

In the previous section we have already shown that Croce's writing was reacting to particular historiographical models, namely the 'racist' and the purely economic ones. The problem with these kinds of histories, in Croce's view, was their inherent reductionism. The main example of this kind of history was to be *L'Italia in cammino* by Gioacchino Volpe published in 1927, just after Croce's work on Italy. Here Volpe, after charging Croce's *Storia d'Italia* with lack of 'objectivity',<sup>138</sup> described the advent of the Fascist Revolution as the inevitable outcome in a nation in which the liberal institutions had proven inadequate to bringing Italy onto the map of Europe. However, Croce never aimed to give an 'objective' and definitive historical account:

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<sup>137</sup> Croce, *Epistolario*, vol. i, p.141.

<sup>138</sup> It is interesting to read what Volpe thought about the 'good historian': 'Penso che lo storico ... debba, dimenticato il travaglio critico e polemico, le molte filosofiche distinzioni e definizioni e costruzioni ... mettersi con cuore semplice, con animo religioso, davanti al flusso delle cose, quasi tuffarsi in esso per avvertirne con tutta immediatezza vibrazioni e moti, forze e direzione.' G.Volpe, *L'Italia in cammino* (Milan: Treves, 1931), p.xx. This sketch of the impartial historian who follows the 'flux of the things' stands in stark contrast with Croce's writing which, according to Volpe, is 'polemica politica ... in ogni pagina, in ogni rigo.' Ibid.

Ma dove mai mi sono sognato di affermare o pensare che un'età storica sia un blocco compatto, una massa di ferro fuso, e che la caratteristica che se ne dà escluda il moto della vita? ... E non ho io stesso dichiarato che non credo ai libri 'definitivi', ma solo a quelli che stimolano nuove ricerche?<sup>139</sup>

The image of the 'blocco compatto' suggests a monolithic conception of historiography, where narrative and 'facts' are ascertained for good, whereas for Croce historiography is an unending process which needs to be probed and verified whenever a new problem arises. Indeed, we have already seen that for Croce historiography is an open process which rejects 'l'utopia del libro completo e definitivo':<sup>140</sup>

L'unica realtà è, invece, quella storia che si suole chiamare *discontinua, frammentaria, soggettiva e non mai definitiva*, la storia come lavoro originale, che le menti filosofiche e critiche vengono di continuo producendo e di continuo correggendo e accrescendo.<sup>141</sup>

Hence, historiography, in Croce's view, far from being characterized by a smooth and continuous process is 'fragmentary', 'subjective' and 'never definitive'. Thus one cannot agree with the observation of Roberts:

Although movement is 'dialectical' ... the overall impression is one of smoothness and continuity. Croce seemed to view any historical process as a linear series of problems, solutions, and new problems ... Thus there is little room in Croce's thinking for crisis, rupture, discontinuity or contingency, and little premium on attempts by historians to unearth the buried layers deposited in the past.<sup>142</sup>

We see here how even one of the most sympathetic commentators on Croce's work has been misled. The role of the historian is a constant critique and correction of the concepts and contents of what we call 'facts'. Consequently, the historian, according to Croce, does not establish the 'Truth' once and for all. He, or she, rather determines, in relation to the time and the conditions in which he or she operates, the validity of one reading in contrast to another. Croce made his position clear at the end of *La Storia di Europa* when, referring to his work, he wrote:

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<sup>139</sup> B. Croce, 'Obbiettanti e seccatori', *La Critica*, i (1930), p.80.

<sup>140</sup> B. Croce, 'L'utopia dell'opera complessiva', *La Critica* vi (1938), pp. 482-83 (p.482).

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*p.483. Italics mine.

Queste, rapidamente qui accennate, non sono previsioni, a noi tutti e a tutti vietate non per altro che per essere vane, ma indicazioni di vie che la coscienza morale e l'osservazione del presente tracciano a coloro i quali, nei concetti direttivi e nella interpretazione degli eventi, del secolo decimonono, concordano con la narrazione datane in questa storia. *Altri, con diversa mente, diversi concetti, diversa qualità di cultura, e diverso temperamento, prescegliranno altre vie, e, se ciò faranno con animo puro, obbedendo al comando interiore, anch'essi bene prepareranno l'avvenire. Una storia informata al pensiero liberale non può, neppure nel suo corollario pratico e morale, terminare con la ripulsa e la condanna assoluta dei diversamente senzienti e pensanti. Essa dice soltanto a quelli che pensano con lei: - Lavorate secondo la linea che qui vi è segnata, con tutto voi stessi, ogni giorno, ogni ora, in ogni vostro atto.*<sup>143</sup>

These words stand in stark contrast to the widespread opinion of a dogmatic thinker with a conservative conception of historiography. Croce saw in Volpe's interpretation the risk of legitimizing the existing dictatorship as the unavoidable outcome of a nation otherwise destined to perish. The further development of his ethico-political component and its emphasis on freedom (*libertà*) which drew attention to the fact that history also had strong moral and political dimensions, was aimed to correct this distortion.

Moreover, if we take into account the *time* and the *conditions* in which Croce wrote his major histories we can also better understand why he did not place emphasis on revolutions and upheavals. We have already mentioned Gramsci's view on Croce's major historical writings of the 1920's and the early 1930's. According to the Marxist thinker, Croce chose to focus on periods of consensus and intellectual direction: he began his *History of Italy* in 1871, when the upheavals of unification were over, and his *History of Europe* in 1815, with the ending of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic disorders. Indeed, Croce 'overlooked' the revolutionary periods in the history of Italy and Europe precisely because he wanted to contrast the 'revolutionary culture' of both Fascism and Stalinism, drawing attention instead to a democratic way of dealing with problems. Hence, Croce chose to focus on the ethico-political aspects of history, namely the values and principles embodied in particular institutions and times, which were central in the struggle against totalitarianism:

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<sup>142</sup> Roberts, *Benedetto Croce*, p.309.

<sup>143</sup> B. Croce, *Storia di Europa nel secolo decimonono* (Bari: Laterza, 1932), pp.361-62. Italics mine.

L'attivismo<sup>144</sup> si dispiega irruente ... gl'impeti nazionalistici e imperialistici scuotono i popoli vincitori perché vincitori e i vinti perché vinti; i nuovi stati, che sono sorti, aggiungono nuovi nazionalismi e imperialismi, l'impazienza per gli ordini liberi ha dato luogo a dittature aperte o larvate, e, per ogni dove, a desideri di dittature.<sup>145</sup>

It has been argued, and Gramsci did so forcefully, that Croce's position, in 'removing' the moment of revolution from his histories was just as ideologically motivated as the position of Marxists and others. This would be true if we could find in Croce's writings the idea that Liberal institutions and practices are inherently the bearers of progress. Although he may well have been convinced that, in many ways, and in some situations, these were the best available during his own lifetime, he was careful not to nail any Liberal flag to the mast in search of the 'great solution'. We should see Liberalism, rather, as the perspective which allowed him most flexibility of movement in his determination to avoid 'metaphysical' and deterministic principles of analysis. The idea, for example, that a revolution was likely to change the situation for the better was for Croce a deterministic one. A revolution taken per se was a historical fact which had to be followed by a period of 'new order' and possibly a new (form of) government or a period of restoration. However, revolution in itself did not guarantee any kind of positive outcome. Indeed, Croce maintained with obvious reference to modern times, that often revolutions were followed by a period of dictatorship with a consequent loss of freedom.<sup>146</sup> We should not mistake Croce's emphasis on reform instead of revolution for a denial of the historical significance of the latter. We have already abundantly referred to Croce's preoccupation for the forces which shape history. Revolutions, tensions and struggle are, for Croce, a part of a history which cannot be ignored:

La superficialità dei correnti concetti storici [indusse] a cullarsi nelle credenze di un roseo progressismo, quasi che si fosse trovata una volta per sempre – con le elezioni, i parlamenti e la libera stampa – la via

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<sup>144</sup> In Croce's writings of the period, 'attivismo', 'irrazionalismo', and 'antistoricismo' are often synonyms for Fascism, which could not be used for obvious reasons of censorship.

<sup>145</sup> Croce, *Storia di Europa*, p.352.

<sup>146</sup> 'Un esempio è in tal riguardo offerto dal periodo della Rivoluzione francese che si disse "del Terrore", e che, creduto processo necessario nelle rivoluzioni a garanzia della loro attuazione e salvezza, come tale passò non solo nelle immaginazioni e nelle dottrine, ma anche nelle operazioni dei rivoluzionari che seguirono ... con l'effetto di suscitare, con la loro minaccia rivestita di storica necessità, un irrigidimento conservatore che si fa poi reazionario, e di frapporre impedimenti a trasformazioni sociali e politiche.' Croce, *Il carattere*, pp.230-31.

regia, le *chemin de velours*, per andare sempre innanzi accumulando comodi, ricchezze e potenza, accrescendo cultura e affinamento e splendore di civiltà senza più duri e crudeli conflitti e devastazioni, senza né guerre né rivoluzioni, senza rischi di ridiscese a forme inferiori di politica e di convivenza sociale, solo con lievi burrasche, tutte pacificamente da calmare e risolvere mercé dibattiti e accordi. Senonché ... *il corso storico ... procede per vie scabrose, dirupi, tra sbalzi e cadute e ferite e morti.*<sup>147</sup>

The conventional interpretation of a detached thinker linked with an elitist and optimistic vision of historical progress does not fit with these words. In reality, Croce did not espouse the grand liberal discourse of history as unstoppable advancement towards the good. The historical process is indeed full of ‘devastazioni’, ‘rivoluzioni’, ‘sbalzi e cadute’. Croce did not conceive history as a display of a sort of abstract rationality. Our response to these disruptive events is historical and has to take into account the very situation in which it arises. The ‘rationality of history’ to which Croce referred was the sacrosanct duty on the part of the historian to make sense of past events avoiding the shortcuts of irrationalism, which was one of the most powerful voices of the time:

Finanche il pessimismo e le voci di decadenza, che si udivano nella letteratura di prima della guerra, si riodono ora, e vanno predicando la decadenza dell’Occidente o addirittura del genere umano, che, dopo aver tentato di assorgere dalla bestia all’uomo, starebbe per cadere (secondo i nuovi filosofi e profeti) nella vita ferina.<sup>148</sup>

Plurality of views and ideas, freedom of press and speech, liberal customs, were opposed to the ‘new world’ that people like Mussolini, and later Hitler, were envisaging. Furthermore, Communism or Catholicism were not excluded from Croce’s sharp polemic:

Il comunismo, che era stato, sotto il nome di socialismo immesso nella vita della politica e dello stato e nel corso della storia, è ricomparso nella sua scissione e crudeltà ... e, al pari dell’attivismo, ... quel comunismo è sterile e soffocatore di pensiero ...D’altra parte, il cattolicesimo, che già aveva tentato di pigliar forza attraverso l’irrazionalismo e il misticismo, ha accolto e viene accogliendo, in gran

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p.118. Italics mine.

<sup>148</sup> Croce, *La Storia di Europa*, p.353.

numero, anime deboli o indebolite e torbidi e malfidi avventurieri dello spirito.<sup>149</sup>

The three antagonists of an authentically *immanent* and *free* conception of history and culture were, in Croce's interpretation, Fascism, Communism and Clericalism. All these ideologies need 'l'ideale di un ordine trascendente di verità, di regola morale e pratica, di congiunto governo dall'alto'.<sup>150</sup> Indeed the philosopher acutely remarked that

Il motivo spirituale che ha spinto ... a rifugiarsi nel cattolicesimo ... è stato non altro che il bisogno, nel tumulto delle idee e dei sentimenti cozzanti e cangevoli, di una verità fissa e di una regola imposta: ossia una sfiducia e una rinunzia ... all'esigenza di una continua critica e autocritica onde la verità si accresce e si rinnova.<sup>151</sup>

Thus, if we consider the particular political climate in which the histories of Naples, Italy and Europe were written, a period in which hostile battle lines were drawn up, we can understand, if not justify, the allegations concerning Croce's lack of social and economic coordinates claimed by some critics.<sup>152</sup> It has been shown in the previous sections that Croce did not deny the influence of elements such as the environment, society and the economy.<sup>153</sup> However, the needs of the moment required a different kind of narrative which would avoid reductionism but at the same time focus on the values and ideas under threat. Indeed, it has rightly been maintained that all these histories were conceived as a 'momento di organica opposizione al fascismo

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p.355.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., pp.355-56.

<sup>152</sup> Croce, in armonia con il suo sistema filosofico, non era neanche sfiorato dai problemi del condizionamento esterno ... e del formarsi di strutture economiche, culturali e sociali capaci di favorire o ostacolare la produttività materiale.' Ajello, 'Croce e la storia meridionale', p.372.

<sup>153</sup> The *Storia di Napoli*, for instance, remains a fundamental point of reference for the history of the kingdom with its attempt to explain the history of southern Italy in a non-deterministic way, focusing on the cultural and political structures rather than finding a simplistic explanation in the adversity of the climate, or in the innate indolence of its inhabitants. Galasso has rightly pointed out that the originality of Croce's *Storia di Napoli* lies in this breaking with both a naïve eulogy and a brisk dismissal of the city: 'In una storia, come quella napoletana, che la maggior parte della tradizione presentava, o con ingenuo campanilismo, quale alto modello di storia civile o, con radicale pessimismo, come una sciagurata successione di eventi rovinosi e di epoche infelici ... Croce ravvisava, grazie ai criteri metodologici da lui adottati, il filo preciso e lineare di uno svolgimento ... la formazione cioè della classe intellettuale nella quale gli sembravano riassumersi la "nazione napoletana" e la sua storia. Così la *Storia del Regno di Napoli* diventava la storia di una delle nazioni dell'Europa moderna.' Galasso, *Croce e lo spirito*, p. 372.

e alla sua politica antidemocratica'.<sup>154</sup> The wide circulation of these works during the years of the dictatorship points to the polemical and in a broad sense 'civil' nature of their intent:

La libertà, che prima della guerra era una fede statica o una pratica con scarsa fede, è caduta dagli animi anche dove non è caduta nelle istituzioni, sostituita dal libertarismo attivistico [fascismo], che sogna più di prima guerre e sconvolgimenti e distruzioni, e irrompe in moti incomposti, e mira ad opere vistose ed aride, incurante o dispregiatore di quelle che si edificano con la meditazione e con l'amore, col pio sentimento del passato e con la forza ardita che schiude l'avvenire.<sup>155</sup>

Although the notion will be fully discussed in the next chapter, we can anticipate that the idea of history as 'history of liberty' will be the framework within which Croce's own historical writing should be understood. This was not a statement of belief in a metaphysical doctrine of automatic progress à la Hegel, as many commentators have argued, but rather a commitment to the value of freedom, and thus a serious analysis of whether the actual course of events is contributing or not to the historical realization of this value in the concrete world of human institutions:

è necessario l'esame, e in ogni caso il riesame, degli ideali che sono oggi accettati, o proposti, o tentati, per vedere se abbiano virtù di dissolvere o superare o correggere quello ch'è il nostro, e, insieme, per cangiare e modificare il nostro in conseguenza della critica in cui è passato.<sup>156</sup>

The above statement is perhaps the most substantial piece of evidence of Croce's aversion to dogmatic thought represented by *La storia di Europa*. Generally speaking the book has been read as a sort of eulogy of 19th century liberalism. However, Croce's aim was not to write in praise of the political life of Europe. Indeed, Croce's reflections, in tune with his conception of history, were aimed at assessing or criticizing the limits of liberalism itself. Hence, the book should be read as an enquiry into the inability of liberals to construct a political project which could create a freer world, instead of a triumphalist statement of a political position.<sup>157</sup> One cannot

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<sup>154</sup> T. Iermano, *Lo scrittoio di Croce* (Naples: Fausto Fiorentino, 1992), p.286.

<sup>155</sup> Croce, *Storia di Europa*, p.354.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.354-55.

<sup>157</sup> David Ward, for instance, referring to *Storia di Europa* argues that, 'Croce's historicism ... far from being the dispassionate tracing of the triumphant ideals of idealism through the ages, becomes a

dismiss Croce's major historical works as an operation of political propaganda as many critics have done. We have already seen how Croce was too aware of the issues involving the historiographical process to fall into the trap of producing historical caricatures. Croce, in accord with his theory, simply drew attention to certain values which he found crucial in a particular period of time according to the needs of the situation. It has been justly remarked that

Long before Albert Camus had popularized a similar idea in *The Rebel*, Croce had held that it was the chief task of the historian to speak out for that side of thought and action suffering from neglect and abuse at the hand of the 'simplificateurs' who are always a threat to our humanity.<sup>158</sup>

It was against this simplification of history in its methods and aims that Croce exercised his powerful critique. The historian, in Croce's view, cannot yield to the temptation of fanciful anticipations but rather must try to understand, in the light of the needs of the present the sense of our past:

Non la 'storia del futuro' (come i vecchi trattatisti definivano la vecchia profezia) ma quella del passato che si ricapitola nel presente, è necessaria all'opera e all'azione ... e da tale necessità è nata anche questa *rimeditazione* che abbiamo voluto fare, e invitare a fare, della storia del secolo decimonono.<sup>159</sup>

In reality, if we adopt Croce's own methodology and read his 'histories' within the polemical context in which they were produced, we find that the charge of conservatism against the philosopher does not do justice to the complexity of these works. In fact, Croce's historiography could find a better 'home' in what we now call 'intellectual history'. Indeed, without excluding other kinds of history Croce was interested, *in that critical phase*, in the critique, promotion and development of certain critical ideas which would shape the history of Italy and Europe. Hence, Croce's historiography was not intended to produce a eulogy of the good old times, but rather it aimed to criticize some of the simplistic views abounding in the historiography of

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performance of that triumph, and thus a mode of controlling and ultimately destroying rival ideologies.' *Antifascism*, p.69.

<sup>158</sup> White 'The abiding influence', p. 121

<sup>159</sup> Croce, *Storia di Europa*, p.354. Italics mine.



his era, and also to explore the limits of 19th century Liberalism.<sup>160</sup> This interpretation of Croce's work, which is centred on his *antimetaphysical method*, has many advantages. First, it demonstrates that Croce's ideas are better understood if we connect them with his theoretical views rather than with an alleged political agenda, or even worse a metaphysical plan that Croce was allegedly following. Secondly, it provides us with a more convincing explanation of the need Croce felt to engage with his times. Instead of a dogmatic philosopher struggling to hold on to his outdated system, we are offered the image of a thinker who was continuously challenging the prejudices and commonplaces of his contemporaries.<sup>161</sup> Finally, this particular reading of Croce's theory of history and historiography undermines the received interpretation of an Olympian philosopher wedded to an elitist and optimistic view of historical progress, who later in his life became increasingly pessimistic about the direction of history. Indeed, we will see that Croce's reflections on the 'end of civilization' need not have given rise to the interpretative acrobatics they did in order to accommodate them to the 'lapsed' metaphysical Croce, since he never embraced the grand liberal discourse of automatic progress in the first place. Instead, Croce's historiographic works focused on the application of his conception of 'storia come storia contemporanea'. History, for Croce, is a preparation for action through the constant critique of the past, stimulated by the needs of the present, in order to be valuable and effective. Such a critique allows us to envisage a different world which could be freer. Thus, as we will see more specifically in the next chapter, history becomes a process of liberation both from the past and the limitations of the present.

Furthermore, one can admit that Croce's theory was not always totally consistent with his writings without discarding, for this reason, his theory. In other words, one can suppose that whilst Croce expressed the need for a new kind of historiography, nevertheless he was not always able to fully apply it to his writing. To assume that there is a *complete* correspondence between Croce's theory of historiography and his historical output is similar to presupposing that a professor of

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<sup>160</sup> Richard Bellamy has rightly maintained that, 'Croce's histories aimed to shed light on why liberalism failed to produce a moral consensus against fascism. His answer falls in two parts -the insufficiency of liberal politics, and the inability of liberalism to become a 'moral ideal'- and are treated in the *History of Italy* and the *History of Europe* respectively.' Bellamy, *Modern Italian Social History*, p. 91.

<sup>161</sup> It has rightly been observed that, 'Croce's abiding enemy was fanaticism, whether the fanaticism of belief (which is the surrender of the individual to supposedly eternal rules) or the fanaticism of unbelief (which is the surrender of the will to a slothful skepticism)'. White, 'The abiding influence', p. 121.

ethics must be inherently good because he or she knows what it is to be morally good. To understand what Croce had in mind we must go beyond this misleading equation and be able to give due attention to his theories without being distracted by his occasional inability to translate these into historiographical practice.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ‘ALL HISTORY IS CONTEMPORARY’

#### 5.1 FASCISM AND POST-FASCISM

Before analyzing the further developments of the antimetaphysical method implied in Croce's theory of history from the consolidation of Fascism to his death, we need to give a brief account of his opposition to the regime, since the philosopher's intellectual and political views are closely related to this.

As we have seen in chapter one Croce's attitude towards Fascism and his role in the aftermath of the Second World War contributed substantially to the view of Croce as a conservative philosopher detached from events. In reality, the philosopher played a major cultural and political role in the struggle against the Fascist dictatorship and the re-establishment of a democratic Italy. More importantly, Croce's output, in line with his historicism, according to which the way in which historians analyze events is fundamentally a manifestation of the concerns of their own time, was markedly influenced by contemporary events: dictatorship, war, and the reconstruction of a democratic state.

It is well known that the philosopher initially saw in Fascism a potential for applying some remedies to the problematic political and social life of Italy. It is easy to condemn in retrospect some of Croce's attitudes, but we should not forget that at the time there was no clear sense of the direction in which Fascism would develop.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, during the first months of Fascism many intellectuals considered the new political movement as a necessary provisional measure for reestablishing democracy. Before the elections of April 1924 Mussolini presented an image of relative moderation, and his government seemed to follow a strategy of caution in relation to both domestic and foreign affairs. Mussolini was also very shrewd in persuading the public that the restrictions on civil liberties were only a temporary measure in a situation of extreme emergency.

In two interviews to the daily *Il Giornale d'Italia*, in October 1923 and February 1924, Croce expressed a sort of provisional benevolence towards Fascism, but at the same time criticized its ideological basis and its unorthodox methods

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<sup>1</sup> This is the opinion of the renowned historian Giorgio Candeloro, *Storia dell'Italia moderna 1700-1950* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1986), vol. 9, pp. 26-7.

towards the opposition.<sup>2</sup> Even the murder of the Socialist Giacomo Matteotti did not convince Croce that Fascism was turning into a dictatorship, although, according to his friend and biographer Fausto Nicolini, Croce felt ‘un disorientamento profondo’.<sup>3</sup> Croce would later remember in his *Taccuini* his naivety in believing Mussolini’s speech after the assassination of the young political leader.

It is extremely difficult to ascertain the reasons for Croce’s attitude towards Fascism, but perhaps one of the causes can be found in the chameleon-like nature of the movement. Indeed, Fascism could appeal to different people from ultraconservatives to ‘revolutionaries’. Moreover, Gentile played a big role in reassuring Croce about the ‘liberal’ nature of the regime and although the two philosophers did not share the same theoretical views, Croce still trusted Gentile’s integrity and judgement. However, the best explanation of Croce’s choice was probably provided by the philosopher himself. In a letter to Gioacchino Volpe, dated 28 August 1927, in which the historian accused Croce of having ‘civettato col fascismo’, he rejected the charges and explained the reasons for his initial openness to the regime:

Io non ho mai accarezzato, adulato, o in qualsiasi modo mi sono mai offerto al fascismo, e anzi ho lasciato cadere le *avances* a me fatte. Ho bensì in un certo tempo sperato e creduto che esso non si sarebbe allontanato dalla via liberale dell’Italia, e questo, se mai, è amore ... per l’Italia.<sup>4</sup>

After this period of uncertainty, when Fascism displayed its true colours, Croce became a fierce opponent of the dictatorship. The notorious speech delivered by Mussolini at the *Camera dei Deputati* in January 1925 made it clear that the democratic system would not be restored, and would be replaced instead by a dictatorship. The already mentioned 1925 counter-manifesto, penned at the request of Amendola and many other antifascist intellectuals, is one of the first documents testifying to Croce’s firm opposition to the regime.

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<sup>2</sup> Bedeschi does not seem to notice that Croce’s interviews did not offer unconditional support to the regime when he maintains that, ‘l’atteggiamento di Croce verso la nascita e l’avvento del fascismo al potere fu non solo di benevola attesa, ma anche di calda simpatia.’ Bedeschi, *La fabbrica delle ideologie*, p.205. The charge of philo-Fascism seems to me extravagant, particularly when we consider Croce’ later activity as an anti-Fascist.

<sup>3</sup> Nicolini, *Croce*, p. 347.

<sup>4</sup> Lettera a Gioacchino Volpe, Meana di Susa, 28 August 1927, *Epistolario I*, p.140.

Before the advent of Fascism Croce's interest in active politics was very circumscribed, despite the fact he was made senator in 1910 and served as 'Ministro della Pubblica Istruzione' under Giolitti's government in 1920-21. From 1925, however, the situation in Italy forced Croce to become more 'political'. After the exile of leaders of banned political parties in 1926, Croce established himself as the main exponent of the opposition. Croce's resistance, as scholars like Garin and Bobbio have noted, was primarily intellectual, although in the most critical phase for the fate of Italy, namely during the provisional government led by General Badoglio, the old philosopher did not hesitate to enter the political fray.

Croce attacked Fascism's ideas refuting the theoretical foundations of the movement through a sharp and trenchant cultural critique. We have already analyzed the political importance of Croce's historiography in opposing the Fascist interpretation of the Rinascimento and the fledgling Italian democracy. The other major instrument of criticism was represented by *La Critica*. Indeed, the journal became one of the most important voices speaking out against the dictatorship, although Croce never yielded to the temptation of turning the paper into an instrument of propaganda:

*La Critica* non era rivista politica e perciò non è intervenuta nelle cose politiche propriamente dette, come tali che uscivano dai confini del suo programma, a discutere, per es., di legislazione, di economia, di guerra, di alleanze e simili, e ha contenuto le sue discussioni e polemiche nella severa cerchia teorica delle idee. Se qualcosa io ho dovuto dire o fare come cittadino nella politica attiva, l'ho detto e l'ho fatto in altra sede, nei giornali politici, quando mi era possibile, o nel Senato del Regno.<sup>5</sup>

On more than one occasion Mussolini tried to suppress *La Critica* but eventually kept it to show that freedom of speech was still alive in Italy.<sup>6</sup> It was probably the international prestige of Croce, together with the schizophrenic relationship between Mussolini and culture, which contributed to the survival of the paper.<sup>7</sup> The historian Renzo De Felice has underlined the importance of the journal in

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<sup>5</sup> B. Croce 'Filosofi, università, regime', *La Critica*,vi (1940) p.424.

<sup>6</sup> The Minister of Education suspended the publication of *La Critica* in June 1940 with the preposterous excuse of limiting the amount of paper wasted. Croce managed to restart the bimonthly.

<sup>7</sup> It has been rightly observed that, 'misure drastiche e risolutive avrebbero potuto avere una ripercussione sull'immagine del regime all'interno e all'esterno più costosa della relativa tolleranza con cui si finiva col comportarsi.' G. Galasso, *Croce e lo spirito*, p.339.

keeping the cultural and moral life of Italy alive, during the crucial years of the establishing of Fascism:

Da quanto siamo venuti dicendo ci pare che dovrebbe risultare chiara una cosa: la profonda differenza che negli anni tra il '29 e il '34 vi era tra la posizione di B. Croce e del gruppo raccolto intorno alla 'Critica' e quella del resto del mondo intellettuale, non solo –ovviamente– di quello fascista o apertamente fiancheggiatore, ma anche di quella parte di esso che ... era in questo periodo ancora in un atteggiamento di non opposizione verso il regime, senza, per altro, accettarne *in toto* la politica, specie per quel che riguardava la cultura. Rispetto a queste posizioni quella del gruppo crociano era l'unica chiaramente antifascista e che si traduceva in una precisa opposizione immediatamente culturale e mediamente politica.<sup>8</sup>

However, although the philosopher may have been allowed more latitude as a writer than other opponents of Fascism, this was based more on the regime's fear of increasing the antagonism of intellectuals rather on any sympathy Croce was showing towards the regime. And certainly, the thesis of a 'cultural dictatorship' enjoyed by the philosopher during this period is untenable.

First one needs to stress that the intellectual atmosphere during Fascism was not as monochromatic as some scholars still maintain. In reality, the 'soft' censorship of the regime allowed a certain amount of circulation for national and foreign culture. Giuseppe Galasso has rightly pointed out the cultural complexity of the period:

Istanze cattoliche, marxistiche, esistenzialistiche e neopositivistiche, interesse per la psicanalisi, per letterature e arti diverse da quelle tradizionali (basti pensare ai romanzi americani, al cinema, al jazz) ... agivano perfino all'interno dell'area fascista.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, a closer look at the actual philosophical and cultural movements during Fascism shows the presence of a large number of cultural groups and philosophical movements. It is true that Croce's philosophy represented a strong point of reference for many anti-fascists but in reality there were other forces, particularly the 'gentiliani' and the neo-thomists, which had a much firmer control over the academic world.

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<sup>8</sup> R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce. Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), p.116.

<sup>9</sup> Galasso, *Croce e lo spirito*, p.340.

The influence of the Catholics in the philosophical field went back to the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, founded in Milan in 1921 and approved by the Fascist regime in 1924. Padre Agostino Gemelli, a highly influential cleric, well-connected in the Vatican, was the rector of this fortress of Catholicism and a keen promoter of neo-thomist philosophy through the periodical 'Rivista di filosofia neoscolastica'.<sup>10</sup> The Catholic movement represented a direct response to both Croce and Gentile, considered corruptors of the young with their 'atheistic' philosophies.<sup>11</sup> The most conservative part of the Church, which eventually prevailed, saw in Mussolini the man who could re-establish the supremacy of Catholicism in public institutions. After the Concordat between the Italian state and the Vatican in 1929, the Catholic Church became the official religion of Italy and Catholic religious instruction was introduced as a compulsory subject in schools. This represented a severe defeat for those, like Croce, who had promoted a secular State within which the Church would have its place, but no particular privileged status. The Concordat had reversed the relationship between Church and State:

Non è ... l'organizzazione cattolica che si sottopone alla autorità dello stato ... ma è il Sommo Pontefice, la suprema e sovrana Autorità della Chiesa che dispone quello che giudica potersi e doversi fare per la maggior Gloria di Dio e per il maggior bene delle anime.<sup>12</sup>

Croce fiercely opposed the Lateran Pacts, together with only 6 senators, while 316 voted in favour. Croce, with his stress on the anti-metaphysical function of philosophy as a replacement for religion,<sup>13</sup> was the main target of the neo-thomists. In 1932 the philosopher's works were put on the Index since they allegedly spread anti-

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<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive account of this period see the already quoted *Cronache di filosofia italiana* by Garin and V. Mathieu, *La filosofia del novecento. La filosofia italiana contemporanea* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> During a philosophical congress in 1929 Gemelli maintained that 'Nulla vi è più di anticristiano ... di più dissolvitore dell'idealismo, perché nessun sistema è tanto negatore del sentimento cristiano della vita quanto l'idealismo ... In un paese cattolico, a giovani figli di genitori cattolici il maestro non ha diritto di propinare il veleno filosofico, il veleno dell'idealismo.' G. Calogero, 'Cronaca e morale del VII congresso nazionale di filosofia', *Educazione fascista*, 7 (1929), pp. 390-400 (p. 392).

<sup>12</sup> M. Bendiscioli, 'I patti lateranensi', in *Terzo programma*, ii (1962), pp.155-71 (p.155). See also the sharp remark of Garin: 'La Conciliazione ... aveva dato forza ai neoscolastici, aprendo loro la possibilità di costituire il fulcro del pensiero ufficiale italiano ... Con la rozzezza che lo caratterizzava, Mussolini parlava di conciliazione tra San Tommaso e Kant.' Garin, *Cronache di filosofia italiana*, p. 458.

<sup>13</sup> 'La religione nasce da un bisogno di orientamento circa la realtà e la vita, dal bisogno di un concetto della vita e della realtà. Senza religione, ossia senza questo orientamento non si vive, o si vive con

religious ideas. The programme of Gemelli was the revival of an updated medieval philosophy in contemporary culture in order to legitimate the claims of the Church in the secular world. After a series of clashes between the 'actual idealists' of Gentile and the neo-thomists led by Gemelli, the catholic movement penetrated Italian academia, establishing itself as a strong current which counterbalanced the power of the 'gentiliani'. Croce, who had refused any kind of university career before and during Fascism, was left out. It is important to stress the fact that Croce's philosophy never enjoyed a status of hegemony in Italian academia.<sup>14</sup> Croce's ideas never penetrated the universities as a 'philosophy', namely as a system of thought. Indeed, some critics have pointed out that Croce's role was inflated by the couple Gramsci-Togliatti who chose the Neapolitan philosopher as the exponent of a certain philosophical perspective.<sup>15</sup> In fact Croce's role was far from being as all-pervasive as the two Communist leaders maintained.

We have already seen that as early as 1914 Croce's already shaky intellectual empathy with Giovanni Gentile collapsed and that from that point the two thinkers took different paths. However, the friendship between the two philosophers ended abruptly only when Gentile adhered enthusiastically to the Fascist regime.<sup>16</sup> This was the dramatic epilogue to a long period of reciprocal criticism. From 1926, the year of the suppression of freedom of the press, Gentile's position in academia was increasingly strengthened whereas Croce was ostracized by virtually all public institutions. The pressure of the Catholics on the one hand, and the attack from the academic world on the other, did not make Croce's life easy.

Another commonplace about the period concerns Croce's alleged aloofness from the dramatic events during Fascism. However, a look at the *Taccuini di lavoro*, published in a limited edition by the Istituto italiano per gli studi storici in 1987, gives

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animo diviso e perplesso, infelicemente. Certo, meglio quella religione che coincide con la verità filosofica che una religione mitologica.' Croce, *Cultura e vita morale*, pp.34-35.

<sup>14</sup> The simplistic view of an idealistic hegemony in the first fifty years of twentieth century Italy is still very strong. See, for instance, G. Semerari, 'Neoidealismo e fascismo' in *Novecento filosofico italiano* (Naples: Guida, 1988), pp.47-67.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance F. Restaino who argues that the whole cultural propaganda of Togliatti was focused on the Italian tradition 'nella strategia volta a ricostruire storicamente, per un confronto politico-filosofico di rinnovamento, la tradizione tradizione De Sanctis-Spaventa-Labriola-Croce-Gentile-Gramsci.' F. Restaino, 'Il dibattito filosofico in Italia (1925-1990)' in G. Fornero, F. Restaino, *Storia della filosofia* (Milan: TEA, 1996), p. 306.

<sup>16</sup> Croce's last letter to Gentile is dated 24 October 1924: 'Caro Giovanni ... da molti anni ci troviamo in un dissidio mentale, che per altro non era da riflettersi sulle nostre relazioni personali. Ma ora se n'è aggiunto un altro di natura pratica e politica, anzi il primo si è convertito nel secondo; e questo è più aspro. Non c'è che fare.' Croce, *Lettere a Giovanni Gentile*, p. 670.



us a completely different picture of the philosopher. For example, in 1926 Croce's house was vandalized during the night by a group of *camicie nere*:

Stanotte alle 4, siamo stati svegliati da un gran fracasso di vetri rotti e di passi affrettati: era una dozzina o una quindicina di fascisti, venuti con un *camion* a devastarmi la casa: hanno rotto tutti i vetri, sfondato quadri e spezzato vasi e mobili delle stanze in cui sono passati.<sup>17</sup>

The same year Croce recorded his distress at the suppression of freedom of speech. The following passage is fundamental for giving a more faithful picture of Croce's feelings:

Penoso senso di soffocamento per la soppressa libertà di stampa, ribellione dell'animo a questa ingiustizia penosa e ipocrita insieme. Ho riesaminato ancora una volta la situazione presente; e il riesame mi avrebbe lasciato nella depressione e nella tristezza.<sup>18</sup>

Terms such as 'soffocamento', 'depressione' and 'tristezza' are terms that hardly square with the serene and detached observer that so much Crocean folklore has disseminated. The *Taccuini* are interspersed with this sense of angst. Even the alleged historical optimism of Croce, namely his supposed absolute certainty of an end of Fascism, is completely disproved:

La sera e parte della notte in dolorosi pensieri, ormai consueti. Ora non è più possibile lotta di opposizione, per la soppressione dei giornali. Al senato darò voto contrario alle leggi testè presentate; e sarà tutto. Ma non è possibile nemmeno accettare la situazione; e non è dato morire, pei doveri che legano alla famiglia, agli studi, alla società. Dunque bisogna vivere *come se* il mondo andasse o si avviasse ad andare secondo i nostri ideali.<sup>19</sup>

Only the thought of *death* could relieve Croce from the anguish, as the following extract shows:

Resisto tuttora perchè ho esempio da dare ... E nondimeno mi sento stanco e l'immagine della morte mi appare come il solo riposo che mi

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<sup>17</sup> Croce, *Taccuini*, p.503.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.441-42.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.452.

possa ripromettere, e, sulla caduta di tutte le speranze, una certezza che si riveste di una pallida luce di gioia.<sup>20</sup>

The animated political life of the first twenty years of the century had been replaced by a climate of suspicion and deceitfulness. Elena, Croce's daughter remembers in her *Ricordi familiari* how the situation *in casa Croce* had changed:

I primi anni del fascismo incisero immediatamente e radicalmente nella vita sociale [di Croce], portando perciò mutamenti di abitudini che allora furono angosciosi ... Qualche tempo dopo il delitto Matteotti cominciarono le voci sulle 'liste' che in questura si tenevano dei nostri visitatori, le sorveglianze notate o immaginate dei poliziotti, che effettivamente dovevano poi per anni sostare sulla nostra portineria, tanto da divenire presenze quasi domestiche.<sup>21</sup>

Croce's life during Fascism, far from being a cocooned one, was marked by an incessant concern for Italy, its people and its cultural life. The *Taccuini* help us to form a better picture of both the thinker and the man. Here is Croce's account of one meeting in Parliament at the end of 1928:

A Roma ... ho fatto atto di presenza in aula. Pena di rivedere i più dei senatori: molti paurosi e sfuggenti ogni discorso e guardantisi intorno a ogni parola un po' libera ... altri esibenti distintivi di una nuova fede, specie fra coloro che furono ultrademocratici, repubblicani, massoni, socialisti. Una delle esperienze più singolari e dolorose di questi tempi è la prova che si ha che uomini con i quali si conviveva e coi quali non si dubitava di essere d'accordo in certi concetti e in certi sentimenti essenziali, che risonavano sulle loro labbra e si mostravano nei loro atti esteriori, non li avevano in cuore dove noi li avevamo e li abbiamo ritrovati viventi e imperiosi. Credevamo di conoscerci e non ci conoscevamo ed eravamo estranei, uomini di diversa razza. Ora la diversità è venuta fuori.<sup>22</sup>

The *Taccuini* also suggest that Croce's role as an opponent of Fascism was not without danger. During the dictatorship not only was the philosopher stalked by the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.128.

<sup>21</sup> E. Croce, *Ricordi*, p.9 and p.22. See also Galasso: 'Corrispondenti, amici, visitatori, chiunque insomma prendesse in qualche modo contatto con Croce fu schedato. Di lui stesso fu sorvegliata ... la casa e furono seguiti i movimenti e i viaggi. La circolazione delle sue opere, così come 'La Critica', furono oggetto di attenzione particolare.' Galasso, *Croce e lo spirito*, p.337.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.51.

police, but also his correspondence dutifully inspected, his moves checked by officials in direct contact with Mussolini, as the following passage shows:

Sono andato a parlare con l'Alto Commissario Castelli per il passaporto da rinnovare ... e gli ho mostrato di essermi avveduto così della sorveglianza e pedinamento che intorno a me esercita la polizia, come nella mia corrispondenza che è tutta aperta e rincollata e non sempre mi è riconsegnata intera.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Croce's travels abroad were often an opportunity to meet with exiles, as in the case of Luigi Sturzo and the Rosselli brothers in Paris.<sup>24</sup> Croce was also connected with the Turin anti-fascist movement (his wife was from the capital of Piedmont). Among his friends there were Luigi Einaudi, Francesco Ruffini, Gioele Solari and Piero Gobetti. Ada, Gobetti's wife, was helped financially by the philosopher after the death of her husband.<sup>25</sup>

In 1934, after refusing the 'tessera fascista', Croce was expelled from all cultural organizations and excluded from academia<sup>26</sup>. The regime was growing more and more hostile to any kind of opposition, whether political or intellectual. The racial laws, approved in 1938, left Croce angry and frustrated:

Ciò che mi opprime veramente è la condizione generale degli spiriti in Italia e fuori d'Italia; la menzogna, la malvagità e la stupidità in cui siamo come immersi e quasi sommersi; gli atroci delitti ai quali si assiste impotenti ... com'è ora la fredda spoliazione e persecuzione degli ebrei, nostri concittadini, nostri compagni, nostri amici, che per l'Italia lavoravano e l'Italia amavano nè più nè meno di noi.<sup>27</sup>

This passage, along with a number of articles published at the time, make it difficult to believe that Croce had anti-Semitic feelings as even discerning scholars such as

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.138. See also Iermano: 'Accanitamente pedinato dalla polizia politica, Croce, all'indomani del 1925, divenne un vero e proprio esule in patria.' *Lo scrittoio di Croce*, ibid., p.258.

<sup>24</sup> In December 1928 Croce paid a visit to 'la tomba del povero Gobetti.' A few days later he met don Sturzo, the exiled leader of the partito popolare. See Croce, *Taccuini*, p.94.

<sup>25</sup> For more details see S. Caproglio (ed.), *Carissima Ada-Gentilissimo senatore. Carteggio Ada Gobetti-Benedetto Croce, 1928-1952* (Turin: Franco Angeli), 1990.

<sup>26</sup> 'Leggo sui giornali che un nuovo decreto impone il giuramento di fedeltà al regime a tutti i componenti delle accademie, delle società storiche ecc. Ed eccomi già virtualmente fuori da tutte codeste istituzioni.' Croce, *Taccuini*, p.393.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.128.

David Ward have more or less covertly suggested.<sup>28</sup> We should not forget that Croce wrote references for scholars like Attilio Momigliano, victim of racial discrimination who hoped to obtain a teaching position in Oxford<sup>29</sup> and Leo Spitzer, a Jewish professor of Romance literature expelled from the University of Köln.<sup>30</sup> Croce never publicized his acts of solidarity towards fellow intellectuals, and only very recently with the reading of his diary have we been able to fully appreciate his commitment to the cause of anti-Fascism. Croce's way of manifesting his opposition to Fascism was less theatrical than that of other intellectuals but nonetheless essential for the antifascist cause.

The activity of Croce as one of the main leaders of the antifascist movement continued through the 40s to the end of the war. It would be a big mistake to underestimate the cultural and political role played by the philosopher during the years of the 'Resistenza'. Indeed, Croce's house became a centre of political opposition and the philosopher acted as a privileged interlocutor between the Allies and the new government which was taking shape during the fall of the Fascist regime. During the war Croce travelled around Italy making contacts with antifascist friends in Rome, Florence, Turin and Milan. Moreover, if the role of general Badoglio in Mussolini's defeat in July 1943 is widely recognised, the part played by Croce, Bonomi, Casati, Sforza and the group of the elderly 'liberali' is still underestimated. Galasso has recently drawn attention to the fact that

Sfugge, per lo più, anche agli storici più attenti, l'alta misura in cui la ripresa politica dell'Italia dalla caduta del fascismo in poi sia stata opera di uomini già giunti alla vecchiaia, o alle sue soglie, che appartenevano alle generazioni maturate nell'Italia pre-fascista.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ward attributes the following sentiments to Croce: 'Insofar as Jewish culture does not share in the eternal and common motives of humanity, it is to be considered a worrisome and incompatible outsider.' Ward, *Antifascism*, pp.81-82.

<sup>29</sup> 'È venuto a Firenze Attilio Momigliano, un altro degli ebrei scacciati dalle cattedre; e ho scritto per lui un certificato da servirgli per la ricerca di un posto all'estero.' Croce, *Taccuini*, 15 January 1939, p.1232.

<sup>30</sup> It is worth reporting Croce's letter to Nicholas M. Butler, president of Colombia University, dated 18<sup>th</sup> May 1933: 'Nella deplorabile persecuzione che si sta facendo in Germania contro i professori ebrei, è stato congedato tra molti altri, il prof. Leo Spitzer, della università di Köln. Lo Spitzer è uno dei maggiori rappresentanti della filologia romanza in Germania e ha scritto una serie di importanti e originali lavori sull'argomento ... A quarantasei anni, egli, che ha moglie e figli, è gettato ... sul lastrico. Mi rivolgo a Lei. Non si potrebbe chiamarlo alla Colombia University o in un'altra università o istituto americano? Sarebbe un acquisto scientifico e, al tempo stesso, un atto di umana fratellanza.' Croce, *Epistolario I*, p.171.

<sup>31</sup> G. Galasso, 'Quell'Italia divisa del vecchio Croce. Il carteggio 1943-47', *Corriere della Sera*, 3 September 1999.

In reality, these elderly individuals who, in the eyes of fresh politicians like Togliatti, represented the compromised old guard, carried out incessant mediating operations with Roosevelt, Churchill, and many other British and American military and political leaders, as well as liaising with the newly restored parties in Italy, travelling from one city to another. We should not forget that at the time Croce was in his eighties.

When the dictatorship ended Croce was among the first to realize the limitations imposed on the country by its lowly status as co-belligerent. Hence, he used his prestige and rhetorical skills to strike a better deal for his country, which at the postwar negotiating table was penalized for its former alliance with Germany. It is in this context that the famous speech given by the philosopher at the Eliseo Theatre in September 1944 should be read. Here Croce maintained that Fascism had to be considered a parenthesis, or a temporary disease, in the development of an otherwise healthy Italian democracy. Many detractors have read the speech as palpable evidence of Croce's flawed historicism. Ward, for instance, maintains that in the Eliseo speech there are,

strong echoes ... of one of the cornerstones of Croce's thought: namely that history is a rational, positive discourse that holds within itself the necessary creative energies to self-correct its own errors.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, Ward continues:

Informing all of Croce's sympathies and antipathies, valorization and condemnations ... is his overwhelming desire to distinguish between the living and the dead. Once the dead had been dispensed with and their living elements arrogated, Croce could then push Italy into line with whoever appeared at a given moment in time to be history's leading light.<sup>33</sup>

Finally Ward concludes that

rather than distortions of Croce's thought, the main points of his speech – the integrity of Italy, Italians, and the Italian tradition; Fascism as an invading foreign virus- represent versions ... of

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<sup>32</sup> Ward, *Antifascism*, p.78.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.83.

positions he had already elaborated upon or were implicit in his earlier writings.<sup>34</sup>

In reality, Ward's argument is flawed in at least three respects. First, we have seen that Croce never maintained that history was a continuous and rational progress towards the best. On the contrary, he acknowledged that the historical process could take completely different paths from those that we expect ('il corso storico... procede per vie scabrose, sbalzi e cadute e ferite e morti'),<sup>35</sup> and explicitly denied that progress was the inevitable outcome of history.

Secondly, Croce did not argue that history could be given a final verdict. He conceived of historical judgement as a continuous reassessment to be verified in the light of the present. What we consider the 'living elements' of a given historical cycle might well change with our needs to confront the past under a different optic. The task of the historian is to construct a plausible narrative, find a *rationale* which gives a plausible account of the events if one does not want to slip into the murky waters of irrationalism. In any case, to reduce the complexity of Croce's historicism to a slogan ('what is living and what is dead') is an easy and unproblematic way of disengaging from a serious analysis.

Thirdly, Ward confused Croce's theoretical views on history with the philosopher's legitimate concerns, as an Italian citizen, for the future of his nation. In June 1944 in a speech for the first congress of the 'Partito Liberale', Croce had reminded his audience of the ever-present dangers of a dictatorship:

Giova non dimenticare mai che l'attrattiva delle dittature è delle più comuni e tenaci o sempre risorgenti, e, nonostante la fioritura affatto recente, nella filosofia, nella letteratura e nella politica, delle figure dei superuomini, dei duci, dei fùrer e di altrettanti personaggi che, sotto nomi nuovi, sono di tutti i tempi, essa risponde a una forma di mente semplicistica, restia all'intelligenza, della complessità della vita e della storia ... per modo che sempre si torna all'invocazione dell'uomo straordinario ... o anche del bonario onest'uomo e pater familias ... che prenda tra le sue mani il governo dei popoli e metta pace e soddisfazione a tutti.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp.77-78.

<sup>35</sup> Croce, *Il carattere*, p.118.

<sup>36</sup> B. Croce, 'Il partito liberale, il suo ufficio e le sue relazioni con gli altri partiti', *Scritti e discorsi politici* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1993) vol. i, pp.129-30.

We can see that for Croce Fascism, far from being a 'temporary disease', was the Italian incarnation of the permanent risk democracies run, since it represents a quick and simplistic answer to the complexity of life and history. Moreover, we have remarked that in *La storia d'Italia* Croce had sought to comprehend the reasons for the downfall of the 'ideale liberale' and the victory of Mussolini and Fascism. Croce had clearly stressed a number of problems inherent in Italian cultural and social life (growing nationalism, hostility for Germany, lack of social unity) which had led to a regression of the fledgling Italian democracy. This analysis was in tune with his dictum according to which every history is a contemporary one.

A few months after his speech for the Liberal party, during a gathering attended by all major political leaders at the Eliseo theatre in Rome, the emergency of the situation required a powerful speech, one which was not directed to a group of academics and did not aim to be a piece of historiography. Croce was addressing his speech to a country fighting a civil war and it was in this context that he defined Fascism as a 'parenthesis' or 'virus' in Italian history. Most importantly, there was an international audience to be convinced, if the Italians wanted support. Croce's objective in the Eliseo speech was the abolition of the clauses of the armistice that significantly reduced Italy's autonomy and let foreign powers dominate internal affairs, consigning the Italian governing coalition to the margins. Hence, to extend the simplistic argument of Fascism as a 'virus', used by Croce in that particular speech, to his whole theory of history is a gross misunderstanding of his intentions. One should not confuse Croce's theoretical posture, which clearly aimed at a non-reductionist and open analysis of history, with a quite contingent and politically charged attempt to portray Italy and its culture in a better light in a politically highly-charged forum.

A similar kind of argument could be applied to those who claim that Croce's philosophy is inherently a conservative one. We have seen the originality of Croce's insights on the theory of history and historiography, and how unconvincing is the argument which finds conservatism the main trait of Croce's speculations. In a letter to Togliatti dated 31 December 1945 Croce expressed his amazement at finding himself among the ranks of the reactionaries, or worse still, the philo-Fascists:

Le dirò ... che provo un curioso effetto ... di meraviglia ... nell'udirvi talvolta designare come 'reazionario' o come 'filofascista'. La modestia e il pudore mi vieta di rammentare che io sono stato il più

radicale ... rivoluzionario nella vita mentale e culturale italiana della prima metà del novecento.<sup>37</sup>

After the Second World War Croce was active as a political leader in the Partito Liberale and his involvement in active politics made him an easy target for similar allegations. In reality, one needs to make a clear distinction between Croce as a member of the Italian Parliament and leader of the *Partito Liberale* and Croce as theoretician of history and historiography. It is true, to be fair, that Croce himself encouraged this confusion when he defined the Liberal party as a *pre-partito*, namely, not a run-of-the-mill party but one which would guarantee the stability and freedom of parliamentary life, almost exclusively through its intellectual strength for which reason it did not concern itself too much about its small membership.<sup>38</sup> However, if this attitude on the one hand betrays a certain naivety on the part of Croce in matters of active politics, on the other hand it shows that he did not have a strong political ideology to defend, unlike the Communists or the Christian Democrats, for instance. Had Croce been a man of political aspirations, he could have exploited his prominent position to be appointed Prime Minister or even President of the Italian Republic.<sup>39</sup> The truth is that Croce's political involvement was dictated by the critical situation in which Italy found itself. It is within this context, namely the chaos that followed the fall of Fascism, and the uncertain future of Italian democracy, that we need to take account of his more explicitly political statements.

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<sup>37</sup> M. Griffo (ed.), *Dall' 'Italia tagliata in due' all'Assemblea Costituente. Documenti e testimonianze dai carteggi di Benedetto Croce* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), p.254.

<sup>38</sup> 'Non ci si inganni sul nome di "partito liberale". Questo ... dovrebbe paradossalmente definirsi un partito senza partito.' Croce, ' Movimento liberale e partiti politici' in *Scritti e discorsi politici*, p. 88.

<sup>39</sup> 'Nel giugno del 1946, dovendosi procedere all'elezione del presidente provvisorio della repubblica, il Croce oppose una volta ancora un rifiuto cortese ma reciso a quei molti rappresentanti dei diversi partiti che avrebbero voluto portarlo lor candidato.' Nicolini, *Croce*, p.416.



## 5.2 History and action: Croce's last phase

The last phase of Croce's reflections on history goes from the period covering 1938, the year of the publication of *La storia come pensiero e come azione* to the ten lessons he gave for the Istituto italiano per gli studi storici in 1951, the year before his death. The most important works on the theory of history in this last period are: *La Storia come pensiero e come azione* published in 1938 and *Il carattere della filosofia moderna*, based on a series of articles which appeared in *La Critica* and published in 1941.

The present section aims to show a continuity in Croce's thought in so far as it was in line with his antimetaphysical method in history and historiography. He reinforced and developed it according to the conditions and the problems of his time. History became closely related to action and liberty, action seen as the application of research into history, and liberty the leading principle. Moreover, it will be shown that in Croce these developments, despite some external similarities, are not like those of Hegel or Marx. For Croce, past history does not determine present action, but prepares it.

A group of prominent critics, by contrast, sees this final phase of Croce's output as reflecting a drastic change of course. Gennaro Sasso, for instance, talks about the crumbling of the imposing structure of the *Filosofia dello Spirito*. According to the prominent Crocean scholar, the philosopher was forced to face the internal contradictions of his system.<sup>40</sup> Also, the historian Galasso talks about a 'seconda filosofia dello spirito' characterized by a 'profondo ripensamento teoretico'.<sup>41</sup> Galasso sees this phase as a conservative involution<sup>42</sup>. Croce, allegedly, embraced a 19th century conception of Liberalism.

As a matter of fact, the term 'storicismo assoluto', used by Croce to define this phase of his research, has been a major source of misunderstanding, often being read

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<sup>40</sup> 'Lungo l'intero corso della sua vita, Benedetto Croce s'impegnò nella difesa, nella rielaborazione, nel perfezionamento del "sistema" ... Era una visione complessa e ... non semplice, quella che in tal modo Croce aveva messa al mondo... Fondata, in ultima istanza, sulla sintesi della forma e della correlativa materia, si comprende bene che era nella saldezza di questa che la concezione crociana aveva il suo fondamento e trovava la sua garanzia. E anche si comprende che la sua luce si sarebbe offuscata, se non addirittura spenta, se per qualche ragione la sintesi avesse conosciuta la sua crisi e i suoi termini si fossero allontanati l'uno dall'altro.' G. Sasso, 'Quello spirito così lacerato' in *La Repubblica*, 19 November 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Galasso, *Croce e lo spirito*, p.390.

<sup>42</sup> 'Il pensiero storico di Croce, e più in generale, il suo pensiero *tout court* fu ... un pensiero 'conservatore ... Quella di Croce fu una resistenza che si svolse sul mero piano culturale e che ne tradiva chiaramente la connotazione ... liberal-borghese.' Galasso, *Croce e lo spirito*, p.358.

as the ultimate imposition of a straightjacket on history. Some critics (Pietro Rossi, Fulvio Tessitore and Giuseppe Cacciatore in particular) relate absolute historicism to a Hegelian *Weltanschauung*.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, even more perceptive critics who emphasized the openness of Croce's theoretical enterprise, such as Roberts, ended up considering 'storicismo assoluto' as an all-encompassing vision of reality, namely a piece of metaphysics instead of an attempt to free us from any grand narrative.<sup>44</sup>

However, 'storicismo assoluto' does not refer to a metaphysical categorization in Croce's intentions. On the contrary, it is the ultimate rejection of all metaphysical plans and the acknowledgement that history considered both in its course and narrative is a totally immanent process. Croce's historicism ultimately argues that we need to get rid of all-encompassing and reductionist explanations of reality and accept history as the main tool for liberating ourselves from the past, live the present, and prepare the future in a non-deterministic way. This can be achieved only when one accepts that knowledge, far from being a static corpus of ideas handed down in the correct form from generation to generation, is in fact more like a patchwork of notions needing to be re-thought, re-interpreted and re-lived according to the changing fabric of concrete historical situation. In this context, Croce talked about history as the only 'religion' now viable for modern men and women in a world where the transcendent has disappeared and has been replaced with an immanent and anti-metaphysical conception of reality.

Indeed, it has been shown that Croce's attitude was characterized by a profound hostility to metaphysics which, in his opinion, was the opposite of a critical attitude towards reality. We have seen throughout the various phases of Croce's thought that the main characteristic of his epistemology was to underline history as an *open discourse* where there is no single, fundamental problem. The obsession with the fundamental problem is what Croce called the 'metaphysical attitude'. In *Il Carattere della filosofia moderna* Croce reiterated this criticism:

Il nome stesso 'metafisica' esprime ... il vano conato d'innalzamento da un mondo di oggetti a un mondo di entità, di supremi oggetti non

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<sup>43</sup> See for instance, Tessitore: 'In Croce la rilevanza assegnata alla presenza di Hegel ... piega irrimediabilmente lo storicismo assoluto verso l'idealismo assoluto assai poco storicismo.' F. Tessitore, 'Fare i conti con Croce', *Il Mattino*, 25 July 1990.

<sup>44</sup> In reality Roberts' criticism does not escape the reification of Croce's method. Indeed, the American scholar insists on the image of a continuous, steadfast 'growth' of the Spirit. In doing so Roberts introduces an optimistic, and even providential component which is not present in Croce's thought.

oggetti e l'invito e la spinta al passo della trascendenza, dal quale ogni spirito critico sempre rifugge, avvertendo vicina la caduta nel vuoto. In questo suo fare, la metafisica ... disconosce l'ufficio della genuina filosofia, ergendosi sopra di lei come 'filosofia prima' o 'filosofia generale'.<sup>45</sup>

The trouble with metaphysics, for Croce, is its rejection of the concrete historical dimension of our thoughts and actions, its incongruous presumption to be above the mundane. A metaphysical view needs to tie its vision to an external non-temporal universe:

E la metafisica trascende ... altresì anche la storia, per attingere un mondo fuori o sopra di questa, e chiudersi in un sistema che in questa chiusura si atteggia a 'definitivo'.<sup>46</sup>

We know that for Croce there is no 'problema unico' but an assortment of problems which emerge according to the time and situation in which we find ourselves. According to the philosopher, the obsession with 'the one cause' is part of our incapacity to deal with the complexity of life in general. It is easy and comforting to encapsulate the world in a grand overarching plan. However, we need to understand that

In realtà, come non c'è un ultimo termine e sistema definitivo, così non c'è un primo in sé, da cui procedano gli altri; e primo, di volta in volta, è il concetto al quale l'interessamento mentale di ciascuno di noi risale in relazione al problema che attualmente lo occupa.<sup>47</sup>

The criticisms of Sasso, Galasso and others, are ultimately based on the assumption that Croce's philosophy started as a grandiose project to 'encapsulate reality'. However, it has been demonstrated that Croce's aim was not to build a definitive system but a 'strumento di lavoro' with which he could better understand some specific problems concerning history and literary criticism. If one considers Croce's enterprise as a search for a suitable epistemological method for ensuring the openness of historical (and literary) enquiry, we not only read his intellectual itinerary

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<sup>45</sup> Croce, *Il carattere* p.3.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.60.

in a different way, but are able to make sense of his antimetaphysical assertions which have been so stubbornly and systematically ignored by his critics and commentators.

It is worth insisting on the fact that the philosophy of the spirit was from the outset an attempt to provide a hermeneutic methodology for reading history, which would on the one hand retain the distinctiveness and complexity of cognitive procedures against the incursions of a crude scientific positivism, without on the other hand falling into a reductionist metaphysics. In this sense the four 'modes' in Croce's 'circularità dello spirito', despite their idealist lexical echoes, are the antithesis of the alleged neo-Hegelian revival. For the German philosopher not only was the 'Spirit', as we have seen, a transcendent historical force in Croce's view, but the course of history was on a predetermined teleological path. The 'absolute historicism' of Croce's final phase is in effect a consolidation of his rebuttal of Hegel's historicism.

In the first place Croce's famous 'circularità dello spirito' is given a new depth by his 'storicismo assoluto'. The 'circularità' in history is no longer simply the interplay between its four 'modes' (aesthetic, theoretical/logical, moral/ethical and economic) but becomes an extraordinary anticipation of the 'hermeneutic circle' much later more formally theorized by Hans-Georg Gadamer. Our reading of history in the light of our present perspectives influences the way we understand our present, which in turn affects the way we shape our future, which in its own turn produces new readings of the past. The tradition is thus a never-ending re-reading with no 'eternal' once-and-for-all interpretations of the past. Croce's 'absolute historicism' is thus the direct antithesis of the 'system' he has been understood to create by even his most sympathetic readers.

In addition, the four 'modes' retain the epistemological function of providing the historian a *method of narrating history* which takes into account its different modes of articulation.

It is significant that Croce intensified his theoretical labours in the throes of the Fascist dictatorship. We have seen his own testimony to how this spurred him on in his old age. His conviction, however, was that such painful historical moments were best responded to, by the historian in his role as such, by increased efforts to understand the historical process itself, and not by camouflaging opposition and propaganda as historiography.

Thus, according to Croce, the historian should know that there will never be a *definitive* account in historical discourse, and he argued that the main feature of

modern thought – *il carattere della filosofia moderna* – is the acknowledgement of the radical historicity of our thinking. To understand our ‘historical being’ is to recognize that our concepts of truth and values are historically determined and open-ended.

We have seen that Croce rejected the idea that historical method should aim for the objectivity of science. On the contrary, it takes into account the subjectivity of judgements, which is not a limitation but a great resource for history. This attitude, for Croce, far from encouraging skepticism, promoted a constant drive to advance our own discovery of the past in the light of the present. Indeed, it is the acknowledgement of a subjective component in history that allows us to read the past as a never-ending narrative to which we constantly refer to make sense of our own lives. Hence it is dogmatism, not relativism, which is the most dangerous posture in history.<sup>48</sup> Croce maintained that, in reality, skepticism was connected with a ‘mancanza di finalità pratica e morale’,<sup>49</sup> which occurred when the philosophical critique confined itself to the theoretical sphere without seeking to go beyond itself. However, it is a practical drive, at the core of historiography, which in its turn ‘suscita problemi storiografici e rende possibile alla critica di porli in problemi definiti e risolverli nella verità.’<sup>50</sup> The real test of historical accounts, their truth content, lies in their explanatory power and capacity to become integral in civil society:

Nella sua cerchia, il lavoro della speculazione non resta chiuso, ma raccoglie l’energia necessaria per operare nel ... mondo; il che non solo si adempie con la comunicazione del processo logico di quel lavoro ... ma soprattutto per la conversione che accade in molte delle conclusioni ragionate in verità evidenti, in detti comuni, in proverbi, alleggerite del loro processo dimostrativo, mutate in articoli di fede, e fattesi guida sicura delle anime.<sup>51</sup>

The most original feature of this last phase of Croce’s thought is the exploration of the relation between history and praxis, and its connection with liberty. History became a practical problem connected with action. The fundamental question was: why do we write history? In other words: why do we need historical narratives?

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Il nostro indefesso pensare filosofico è, in perpetuo, questo integrare i pensieri passati, cioè farli morire nella loro assolutezza.’ *Il carattere*, p.41.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p.176.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.111.

For Croce the answer is simple: historical narration is indispensable for overcoming the past, creating the conditions for understanding the present and preparing the future. Hence, Croce insisted with new emphasis on the functional aspects of historical knowledge:

Specificata ed individuata, e non generica ed astratta, è dunque la conoscenza storica, perché specificato e individuato è il bisogno pratico a cui essa risponde, specificata e individuata l'azione pratica a cui mette capo.<sup>52</sup>

History is now expressly connected with *action* although it does not determine it. The historiographical problem is related to a 'bisogno del fare'. In other words, the historical narrative depends on this need for practical application. Within this perspective, Croce's historical method with his four modes represented a concrete way of approaching the complexity of reality:

La genesi del problema storiografico è sempre in un *bisogno del fare* ... Questo bisogno è sempre specificato come bisogno di un fare economico o etico o estetico o filosofico (o come altrimenti si formuli o si determini), e l'indagine correlativa procede secondo una di queste categorie.<sup>53</sup>

Insisting on such concrete requirements, Croce maintained that history's vital role is to 'svegliare e formare l'abitudine a intendere situazioni reali, riportandole alla loro genesi e collocandole nelle loro relazioni.'<sup>54</sup> At first sight this emphasis on the practical aspects of history could be assimilated to Marx's. Indeed, the German philosopher also strove to construct a form of thought which would address itself more effectively to 'reality'. However, for Croce, history does not determine action, it simply prepares it. In other words, we need historical knowledge to prepare our action, but this knowledge does not determine in a causal or deterministic way, our activities. Hence, historiography conditions our vision of future events but it does not, in any way, determine them:

Il rapporto tra storiografia e attività pratica, tra conoscenza storica e azione, pone bensì un legame tra le due, ma non punto un legame

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.198.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.28 Italics mine.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

causalistico e deterministico ... L'azione, pur nella sua ideale corrispondenza con la visione storica che la precede e condiziona, è un atto nuovo e diverso ... Può dirsi dunque, che la storiografia, rispetto all'azione pratica, sia preparante ma *indeterminante*.<sup>55</sup>

One can grasp the originality of Croce's view when it is compared with Hegel's and Marx's. Hegel had a completely different vision of history. The development of events for the German idealist philosopher could be determined from the 'signs' of the past. Thus, according to the Hegelian scheme, one could *predict* future developments from the evidence of the past. Also Marx, with his forecasting of the crumbling of the bourgeoisie and the dictatorship of the proletariat, had a deterministic view of history. On the other hand, for the Italian philosopher *history's function is not to speculate about our future*. When confronted with events, the notion of a past superseded by a brighter future, like the notion of an inexorable progress towards a perfect state of affairs, is untenable. Croce's radically immanent view prevented him from using historiography in the manner of a clairvoyant. Instead, the knowledge of the past has to be applied to the present since it seeks to

serbare viva la coscienza che la società umana ha del proprio passato, cioè del suo presente, cioè di sé stessa, di fornirle quel che le occorre sempre per le vie da scegliere, di tenere pronto quanto per questa parte potrà giovarle in avvenire. In questo alto suo pregio morale e politico si fonda lo zelo di promuoverla e di accrescerla.<sup>56</sup>

It is this constant negotiation and relationship between past and present which makes historical knowledge problematic but also essential. And in this sense, in its constant attempt to make sense of past events with a rational explanation, history is logical:

Se la logica è nell'uomo è anche nella storia, e se il pensiero umano pensa questa, la pensa ... logicamente.<sup>57</sup>

The alternative to a history which embodies an open, critical and non-reductionist account of the past, is a regression to mythical or religious narratives. Indeed, for the philosopher, any attempt to break the basic relation between history

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<sup>55</sup> Croce, *La storia come pensiero*, pp. 170-01.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.21.

and reason and find forms of irrationality in history itself was in effect itself a capitulation to the irrational:

Se una trattazione storiografica esclude da sè un fatto col pronunziarlo irrazionale e negativo, dimostra con ciò non l'irrazionalità e l'insufficienza di quel fatto, ma la sua propria irrazionalità e insufficienza, perché la sua ragione e potenza consiste nel ritrovare la ragione di ogni fatto.<sup>58</sup>

The loss of a sense of history, with a shortcut into declarations about the irrationality of events to explain the complexity of reality was, Croce argued, the sign of an acute crisis of modernity. Croce was convinced that at stake here was not a particular ideal but rather the very condition in which ideas are possible. Indeed, reflecting on the condition of his time, he remarked:

La conclusione a cui si è indotti dinnanzi all'esperienza del presente non è dunque che la crisi sia di un ideale particolare ... ma che sia invece dell'idealità stessa ... che come nobilita la vita dell'individuo, così rende alta quella dell'umanità e ne segna le grandi epoche.<sup>59</sup>

However, Croce was firm in the distinction between the necessity of a rational explanation in historiography on the one hand, and an assumed logicity intrinsic in the historical events on the other, which in his eyes was unacceptable. His insistence on the rationality of the historian's discourse did not entail seeing a metaphysical rationality at work in the course of history. One can, indeed should, employ rationally ordered discourse to explain events which may proceed on a non-rational basis. In other words, the logic of discourse does not imply the logic of events:

La parola 'logica'... significa cosa ben diversa dalla logicità, un disegno o un programma secondo il quale la storia s'inizierebbe, svolgerebbe e terminerebbe, e che allo storico spetterebbe di ritrovare, sottostante ai fatti apparenti, nascosta matrice di questi fatti e ultima e vera interpretazione.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, Croce maintained, with reference to Hegel and Marx in particular, that their attitudes hid a 'theological' posture. Indeed, Croce argued that,

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.168.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.,p.109.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.



più volte i filosofi hanno ragionato un siffatto disegno svolgendolo dal concetto dell'Idée o da quello dello Spirito, o, altresì della Materia: senonché Idee, Spirito e Materia travestivano in varie guise il Dio trascendente.<sup>61</sup>

One of the purposes of Croce's antimetaphysical posture was to preserve the connection between history and liberty. After the failure of grand metaphysical narratives such as idealism and Marxism, Croce's problem was how to relate historiography to a purposive dimension. To Croce idealism and Marxism, with their different visions of history as having a purpose of its own, rendered nonsensical the idea that human beings could engage in meaningful activity which was not identified with the greatest purpose of the historical process. These ideologies also made it difficult to see what sense could be given to human liberty within such transcendental frameworks. Croce's radically immanent conception of history, therefore, was faced with the problem of how to conceive of human liberty and human purposive activity within the historical process without depriving them of meaning. His answer was articulated in a number of directions. History operates at different levels: a) individual. It is the liberation from the burden of the past. b) Collective. The aim of history is to render the collectivity more aware and thus freer. c) Ideal. History as a process of liberation and /or purposive action is the only viable 'teleology' in an antimetaphysical conception of reality.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the philosopher argued that the very reason for history lies in its capacity to free men and women from the burden of the past. This process, which is both individual and collective, is for Croce, the motor of history, its very *raison d'être*. In this sense the philosopher insisted that history is history of liberty, namely an incessant process of liberation from the past through a constant critique of the present. Croce held that writing history is an attempt to settle accounts with the past so that,

tanto più energicamente si conosce il passato e tanto più energico sorge l'impeto di andare oltre di esso.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> In this sense, teleology can be retained as a useful term or concept for designating the purposive dimension of human activity, without which human history would be reduced to a simple recounting of meaningless events. It does not necessarily therefore, imply a *predetermined final destination*, in which sense it is frequently used.

<sup>63</sup> Croce, *La storia come pensiero*, p.34.

Here the knowledge of history becomes the main instrument for overcoming the past and going beyond it. This process of *liberation* bears some similarities to the procedures of Psychoanalysis. It is a principle of psychoanalysis that our early patterns of adaptation to reality are repeated and constitute our basic mode of comportment in later life. Similarly, our basic attitudes are built on in this way. Lack of reflection on our past simply consolidates and rigidifies these stock responses and attitudes. Therapeutic activity thus requires us to unearth the origins of these patterns which are causing dysfunctional disturbances and critically examine them in order to move forward. In an analogous way, at a different level, historical understanding is essential if we are to achieve a full understanding of the present, and what it is in the past which has led to our present predicaments. The outcome of historical understanding is not an idle or simply speculative contemplation of the past, but an awareness of the past which can liberate us from its negative conditioning moments. In this sense we need to be freed from history:

Scrivere storie ... è un modo di togliersi di su le spalle il passato. Il pensiero storico lo abbassa a sua materia, lo trasfigura in suo oggetto, e la storiografia ci libera dalla storia.<sup>64</sup>

Historiography 'frees us from history' in so far as it addresses the problems we are facing and provides useful suggestion for our acting.

On a more practical level for the time in question, in connection with the emergence of different kinds of totalitarianism, Croce related history to liberty. Croce's statement on 'history as history of liberty' has also often been misunderstood. Indeed, we have seen how many critics relate Croce's views on liberty either to a nineteenth century conservative view or to Hegel's philosophy which regards history as the unfolding of Liberty through the Spirit. Bobbio, for example charged Croce's conception of liberty with being abstract and reactionary, and the recently republished work by Sartori, *Studi Crociani* also insists on the purely theoretical meaning given by Croce to 'libertà' thus excluding the philosopher from the Liberal-democratic

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

tradition and questioning the effectiveness of Croce's position.<sup>65</sup> However, Bobbio and Sartori missed the complexity of Croce's point.

Firstly, Croce did not deny the historical connection between liberty and classical liberalism. In *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, when Croce talked about the emergence of the concept of liberty in the nineteenth century, we can read:

È da tener presente che una rivoluzione mentale, veramente piena e viva, si lega ... a un nuovo orientamento e atteggiamento rispetto ai problemi della vita pratica; e tra i due si stabilisce un circolo mediante il quale si rinvigoriscono e si ampliano a vicenda. Il correlativo dello storicismo, erede dell'illuminismo, era, nella vita attiva e pratica, l'indirizzo nuovo della libertà non più astratta e atomica come nell'illuminismo, ma concreta e unificata con la vita sociale e storica.<sup>66</sup>

Far from exhuming it from an abstract idealist tradition, as we can see from the above passage, Croce related the emergence of a new idea of liberty to the concrete and practical historical circumstances of the society in which this idea was conceived. Moreover, it is not true, as is usually claimed to his discredit, that Croce maintained that Germany was the homeland of historical Liberalism.<sup>67</sup> On the contrary he argued that

la concezione storico-liberale della vita ... non ebbe nascita in Germania, nè in Germania ha avuto altro che fuggevole fortuna e di riflesso, e solo negli anni che precedettero e in quelli che dappresso seguirono il 1848. Il paese e il tempo in cui quella fusione si compié fu la Francia ... e dalla Francia la nuova concezione si sparse in tutto il mondo, operò altresì sulla vecchia libertà inglese ... Allora l'illuminismo, integrato dallo storicismo, si trase e si rigenerò praticamente nel liberalismo.<sup>68</sup>

Croce did not deny that historical Liberalism originated in France and Great Britain. Indeed, he argued that

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<sup>65</sup> Sartori argues that Croce's concept of 'libertà senza aggettivi, si invola verso una rarefatta stratosfera metastorica, rivelandosi incapace di aderire e di spiegare davvero le vicissitudini della libertà storica.' G. Sartori, *Studi Crociani II. Croce etico-politico e filosofo della libertà* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1997), pp.158-59.

<sup>66</sup> Croce, *La storia come pensiero*, p.68.

<sup>67</sup> See Bobbio's argument in chapter one.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71.

In Germania, per le particolari condizioni politiche del paese, arretrate rispetto a quelle dell'Inghilterra e della Francia ... il processo si squilibrò verso la teoria a scapito della pratica ... Questa scissione del pensiero dall'azione, questa rivoluzione meramente ideale di fronte a una rivoluzione reale, fu notata dai tedeschi stessi al prorompere della rivoluzione francese.<sup>69</sup>

The charge that Croce got the genealogy of classic Liberalism wrong is unfounded and linked to the preconception of his historicism as an abstract philosophy which does not take into account the concrete historical process. Indeed, it has been shown that Croce's aim was not to reinstate the old 'liberale' view. In reality, Croce carried out a stringent critique of liberalism, underlining its flaws in *La Storia d'Europa*.<sup>70</sup> We have also seen that Croce's view on history was profoundly different from Hegel's. In reality, we have demonstrated that Croce's concern with history was so central in his philosophical quest that he defined philosophy as 'methodology of history.'

It is true, however, that in this period of Croce's writing, he was more interested in the principle of liberty itself than in its history. But this was connected to his search for an immanent conception of history as a counter to Hegelian idealism. Indeed, Croce distinguished liberty as an expression of political life from liberty as a principle. The Italian philosopher had to face a major problem. If there is no metaphysical plan in history, which Croce sees instead as an open and immanent process, how can we state its purpose? In order to answer this question Croce had to put liberty at the core of the historical narrative and acknowledge that liberty involves our writing history. In other words, history is not a 'thing' with a 'purpose'. We should not make the mistake of reifying into some kind of ontological substance an abstraction we have formed to describe the flux of events. History has no existence apart from the free and purposive activity of human beings. But the fact that human activity is purposive does not guarantee the fulfilment of any human activity. Thus, Croce made clear that the historical process does not lead necessarily to a better world. It is not, like in Hegel or Marx, the unfolding of a process which will reach

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p.69.

<sup>70</sup> 'History of Europe in the nineteenth century ... is not at all, as has been charged, an uncritical tribute to nineteenth century liberalism. Nor is it a sanguine assertion of the inevitability of liberalism's triumph, which would have made it a sort of *Divine comedy*. It is rather a study of the failure of liberals to create a world in conformity to their own laboriously articulated and heroically affirmed ethical ideal, which make their story a sort of tragedy.' H. White, 'The abiding influence', p.123.

liberty as the ultimate goal. History considered as events which happen might well end badly.

Only in one sense, for Croce, can we conceive history as liberty; namely when we focus on the liberating component that history has for humanity. In this context, Croce distinguished liberty as the purposive element which represents the very foundation for history from an historically determined idea of liberty. Indeed, Croce differentiated liberty as a practical ideal aimed at creating a better society, from liberty as ‘forza creatrice della storia’.<sup>71</sup> This is a very important point. Croce here was drawing attention to the *purposive dimension* which all historical activity has. We know that for Croce there is no Spirit hovering above the events and no eschatology. There is, instead, a constant tension in our understanding of the past through the light of our present. This concept of liberty, far from being fruitless is the very foundation of historiography and, indeed, Croce defined it as a ‘criterio di interpretazione storica.’<sup>72</sup> *Thus, liberty far from being a useless notion is crucial for a radically immanent conception of history.* For Croce, only a critical approach to reality which does not neglect its complexity, and still has a purposive dimension can provide us with the tools for understanding and changing the world.

Let us summarize what has been argued so far. During his last phase, Croce developed his theory of history with particular attention to action and liberty. Indeed, the philosopher argued that to be effective, history has to prepare action through a critique inspired by the situation in which we live. This critique allows us to create the conditions for a different world. Hence, history becomes a process of liberation from the past and the limitations of the present for both the individual and society. Thus, history maintains a strong purposive element which permeates the tensions involved in creating a better awareness and understanding of our problems. Croce insisted that this critical awareness was the only possible ‘teleology’ we can expect from history, excluding all ‘philosophies of history’ involving a predetermined objective.

The Italian philosopher was conscious of the fact that an immanent conception of history which rejected all grand narratives and utopias was something that could not be easily accepted:

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<sup>71</sup> Croce, *La storia come pensiero*, p.112.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Come fornire ai ricercatori di un ‘non so che’, agli insoddisfatti della vita reale, a coloro che s’immaginano di essere dalla realtà delle cose stretti in limiti che li opprimono e ne vogliono uscire o saltar fuori, come fornire a costoro il serbatoio delle incomposte e contraddittorie e vacue speranze, dei pensieri non pensabili, delle cave nebbie e delle inquiete larve? Dove manca l’esperienza, non nasce il problema, e la filosofia non ha niente da dire.<sup>73</sup>

Uncertainty in intellectual and practical life had to be faced and responded to. For Croce, easy enthusiasm or easy pessimism both displayed the same metaphysical attitude, namely the abandonment of criticism in favour of ‘theological’ explanations of the world. Existentialism, with its stress on the anguish of man ‘thrown’ into the world, was for Croce the worrying sign of a rationale which alienated itself in order to construct a transcendent world, forgetting the real one. This is reason why Croce criticized existentialism so harshly.

It is very easy in retrospect to criticize Croce’s alleged lack of sympathy for the existentialist movement. However, if we take into account the historical context within which this critique was carried out we arrive at a more balanced view of what Croce feared. The philosopher was reacting, or perhaps overreacting, to a trend that he found worrying: the idea that there was nothing to be done to change the existing situation. Indeed, Croce feared that in a world dominated by a paralyzing existential ‘angst’, democracy and dictatorship offered no fundamentally different prospects. The alternative was mysticism or apathy as in the case of Meursault, the character of Camus’s *Outsider*, for whom life and death are the same. Moreover, we should not forget that when Croce wrote his criticism on existentialism, Heidegger had just given his assent to the Nazi regime with his notorious speech at Heidelberg University.

Ironically, Croce was subjected to two opposing and contradictory kinds of criticism. Indeed, from the existentialist point of view his idea of history was too narrow, since it did not take into account the very condition of humanity which was represented by its alienation and frailty. On the other hand, from the ‘progressive’ point of view, Croce was not active enough, and his philosophy did not leave room for drastic social change. We can now understand better why Croce’s philosophy was quickly discarded. Croce’s position did not provide magic formulas or easy slogans for changing the world. It yielded neither to an easy pessimism which would keep the *status quo*, nor to an equally easy optimism which promised a bright future with the

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<sup>73</sup> Croce, *Il carattere*, pp.34-35.

end of all conflicts. Croce's antimetaphysical position was too realistic to be enticed by these extremes. These critiques from opposing directions reflect the discrepancy but also the combined force of the attack unleashed on Croce's philosophy. We have seen that the philosopher did not have the Olympian detachment for which many detractors blamed him, and that his historicism was firmly rooted in an immanent conception of history and culture. Nevertheless, it was easy for many, after Croce's death, to overlook the complexity, the richness of his position, to make him a sort of punch - ball to be quoted only for denigration. But, in hindsight we can see that Croce was in reality providing a scheme of historical narrative which aimed to avoid the contradictions of both existentialism and Marxism, powerful ideological forces in post-war continental Europe.

The valid claims of existentialism, namely those against an abstract use of reason, against the overwhelming power of scientific schemes, its critique of academic philosophy, were in large part shared by Croce. However, he could not accept the fatalism attached to many existentialist thinkers who put 'angst' at the centre of their philosophical concern. On the opposite side was Marxism, or, to be more precise, a dogmatic Marxism whose optimistic views obliterated the complexity and tragic dimension of life. Most importantly, Croce's main concern was the possibility of a critical method in history which did not yield to 'metaphysical' explanations. If we consider Croce's endeavour a genuine quest for a more suitable method for historical enquiry we can also consider his last reflections on the possibility of the end of civilization under a different light.<sup>74</sup> Instead of a disconsolate manifestation of Croce's growing pessimism they can be integrated as an important part of his research.

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<sup>74</sup> I am referring in particular to the essays 'La fine della civiltà' and 'L'Anticristo che è in noi', *Ultimi Saggi* (Bari: Laterza, 1963).

### 5.3 CROCE TODAY

We have seen that the core of Croce's approach is his remarkably consistent and uncompromising reliance on a non-metaphysical and non-reductionist method from the very beginning of his career. This was Croce's reaction to those 'grand narratives' which in his eyes were doomed attempts to restore a metaphysical view.

One should not forget that from the beginning of his literary career Croce was in one way or another always attempting to counter strong reductionist tendencies which he found initially with late 19<sup>th</sup> century positivists, then in Saussure in linguistics, Freud in psychoanalysis and Weber in sociology, to name but a few. He was always alert to intellectual tendencies, or methodological systems and models which attempted to reduce the complexity of reality to an overarching system. The age seemed to demand rapid and at times one-dimensional responses to a world in which values and certainties were changing drastically. His own intellectual propensity was always to resist such temptations, and to challenge them whenever they made their appearance.

The inclination to seek immediate historical panaceas became even more pronounced in Italy after the Second World War, when the Left, riding the wave of anti-fascism, became the dominant force among a variety of 'progressive' groupings struggling for a cultural hegemony which would rapidly fill the vacuum. A momentum was injected into this new enterprise by a mind-set dominated by the need for 'reconstruction'. Theoretical issues were impregnated with strong purposive dimensions driven by ideological constructions. Croce was going against the current. Indeed, for him there was a sort of original sin in all theoretical constructions which attempted to channel or shape the course of history according to ideological schemes. We know that for Croce there was no single fundamental problem of reality to be solved, such as class domination, but a group of historically given issues which emerged from the needs of the present situation. Underpinning this approach was the conviction that philosophy does not dictate the fundamental laws of reality but is rather a critical attempt to analyze and define our experience. In this respect Croce is very modern and his mistrust for systems was a direct result of his antimetaphysical attitude. Indeed, his antimetaphysical method of reasoning allowed him to reflect on the ineffectuality of all-encompassing theoretical structures and was decisive in the development of his theory of history.



In relation to his reflections on history, there are similarities between Croce's antimetaphysical methodology and some contemporary currents of thought. Moreover, I believe that Croce could trigger interesting questions about the status of history in the contemporary debate. The first point that needs to be emphasized is that Croce's conception of history bears strong similarities to postmodernism. Croce, as have postmodern thinkers, raised the question of the meaning of history in a non-metaphysical world. Indeed, for the Italian philosopher, as in many postmodern thinkers, the meaning of history cannot be found in a transcendental plan. Croce shared with postmodernism the rejection of 'grand narratives' to use Lyotard's term.<sup>75</sup> The question of the meaning of history is central both in Croce and postmodernism. Indeed, thinkers such as Foucault, White, and Croce have in common a conception of history as an open process which needs to be continuously discussed and reassessed. This is the condition of the modern world: history as an open narrative. There is in all of these thinkers a rejection of what Foucault defines in his *Archeology of knowledge* as 'total history'. Foucault rejects 'total history' and replaces it with the idea of 'general history':

The theme and possibility of a *total history* begin to disappear, and we see the emergence of something very different that might be called *general history*. The project of a *total history* is one that seeks to reconstitute the overall form of civilization, the principle – material or spiritual – of a society, the significance common to all the phenomena of the period, the law that accounts for their cohesion.<sup>76</sup>

The acknowledgement of a different attitude to history has important consequences in both the discourse and the practice of historiography:

A total description draws all phenomena around a single centre – a principle, a meaning, a spirit, a world-view, an overall shape; a general history on the contrary, would deploy the space of a dispersion.<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, we have seen that in Croce there is no 'grand narrative' to be built. History is not an imposing project with a predetermined teleological path which the historian has the duty to uncover, but is revealed in the 'particolare situazione storica

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<sup>75</sup> J. F. Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979).

<sup>76</sup> M. Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, p.15.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

in cui il pensatore di volta in volta si trova.’<sup>78</sup> Following this method we come to the conclusion that

il problema di cui si può e si deve dare la storia è soltanto quello ben determinato e individuato, che si lega a un nuovo e individuato concetto di cui il nuovo pensatore indaga e trova la genesi.<sup>79</sup>

In philosophical terms, the parallel with Gianni Vattimo’s ‘weak thought’ is striking. For Croce, the all-encompassing plan of a universal compendium of knowledge is now replaced by the specificity of the research. This method has important repercussions in historiography which is now seen as an essential tool in understanding where our values, beliefs and social practices come from. If we admit that our understanding of the world is historically conditioned we acknowledge that our views are partial and not fixed. However, attention to the role of subjectivity does not diminish the importance of the historical resource but it does make it more complex. For Croce, it is when we want to look at the past ‘as it really was’, namely as a thing separated from the present concerns, that we ossify history into a sort of museum. Croce’s approach is close to what the postmodern historian Alun Munslow calls ‘epistemic relativism’.<sup>80</sup> However, one should not confuse historical and moral relativism.<sup>81</sup> In other words, ‘epistemic relativism’ does not imply that anything goes in history, but rather it opens up history to new sets of problems which no amount of sources and documentation can resolve. Munslow is reacting against the tradition in historiography represented by an untheorized empiricism which believes that all historiographical issues can be resolved with access to the appropriate sources. His argument is that the very same sources are open to a multiplicity of interpretations if viewed from different epistemological starting points. Croce’s four ‘modes’ as providing an epistemological basis for different kinds of historical narratives would undoubtedly qualify as instances of Munslow’s ‘epistemic relativism’. An even more fundamental point of agreement, however, is the conviction of both historians that no interpretation of historical events can be definitively closed, since history itself will

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<sup>78</sup> Croce, *Il carattere*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.77.

<sup>80</sup> A. Munslow, ‘Where does history come from?’ *History Today*, 3 (2002), pp.18-22 (p.21).

<sup>81</sup> Maurice Mandelbaum, one of the first American commentators of Croce’s thought, considered the Italian philosopher together with Dilthey, and Manheim, a relativist.

continually be changing the epistemological starting points from where interpretations begin.

In this connection Croce's hermeneutics is remarkably close to Gadamer's theories of interpretation. The German philosopher claims that in our approach to the understanding of texts (and this applies equally to a period of history seen as a text), 'the logic of the human science is the logic of the question.'<sup>82</sup> This means that we 'understand historical events only if we reconstruct the question to which the historical actions of the person involved were the answers',<sup>83</sup> or at least the attempted answers. Gadamer comments on the closeness of his ideas to those of Collingwood, who used the 'logic of the question' in a critique of the Oxford 'realist' school. He also observes that Collingwood's discoveries of what was missing in the 'naïve hermeneutics founded on the prevailing philosophical critique' were influenced by Croce who had understood, earlier, in his *Logica* 'every definition as an answer to a question and hence historical.'<sup>84</sup>

Gadamer's observations on Croce require a brief elaboration, since they point to one of the Italian's most important, but also most neglected and misinterpreted, insights. It may, at first sight, have the appearance of a truism to observe that historical events can only be understood if we understand the question to which they to be an answer. But Croce's observation contains critical requirements which are easily missed. The difficulty of the historian's task lies in finding the correct question, which is not always the one which springs to mind most easily. As we have observed, and will comment on again shortly, the historian's quest is necessarily related to his 'interests', and although these provide an essential link between past and present, they can also mislead, and this in a number of ways. Quite apart from the issue of the historian's subjective preferences for certain 'questions', even the historian who exercises sufficient critical self-awareness is in this regard still at risk. For example, if we call to mind Croce's 'modes' of narration, the further point he is making is that in any period under analysis we cannot assume that the same 'question' (or historical issue) arises simultaneously, with equal force, or even arises at all in every sphere. The historian narrating in the economic 'mode' cannot assume that issues/questions arising in the philosophical, aesthetic or ethical spheres should be given equal weight

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<sup>82</sup> H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 370.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370, n.315.

in his current narrative. Issues are not to Croce historically homogeneous at all given points in history, as if in any given period the same historical sensibilities are transferred across all spheres. But even when the sensibilities are shared, we cannot assume that the questions being raised are necessarily being responded to. Can we assume, for example, in a global situation in which we are all aware of the fact that two-thirds of the world's population lives in poverty, and that our industrial and commercial practices are threatening our environmental survival, that the policies of the International Monetary Fund are intended as answers to questions which these facts pose?

Absurd as it would seem to us to answer these question in the affirmative, such a response might not seem so absurd to a historian three or four hundred years in the future, far removed from the living context, swamped with masses of empirical data, and searching for the 'spirit of the age' for clues to guide interpretation. The 'spirit of the age' approach is, of course, to Croce a hopelessly crude piece of metaphysics; but equally metaphysical were the more rigorously defined 'grand discourses'. The historian's ability to detect the 'real' question to which history's protagonists seek to repond lies in the ability to discriminate between their different discourses, which always arise within specific spheres of 'interest', which determine the 'questions' of the protagonists.

To take up the issue of the 'interests' of the present, Croce thought that history was essential to us in order to understand where we are and where we are going. When we look at past events we see them through the lenses of our present 'interest'. Indeed, the significance of history has to be found in what Croce defined as the 'interest' and perspectives of the present. In this, also, we find a parallel in Gadamer who argues that the historian's naiveté 'becomes truly abysmal when he ... demands that in understanding history one must leave one's own concepts aside and think only in the concepts of the epoch one is trying to understand.'<sup>85</sup> This leads to what Gadamer refers to in the historian's work as the 'fusion of horizons' which is the equivalent of Croce's claim that 'every history is a contemporary one.' But for Croce the contemporary 'interest' assumed different aspects or modes: the aesthetic, logical, economic, and ethical. Thus Croce conceived a non-reductionist epistemology which took as its starting point whichever facet was warranted by the circumstances.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p.396.

The emphasis on *narration* rather than on a source-based conception of history is another element which Croce shares with postmodern thinkers like Hayden White, for instance. We have seen that in Croce narrative is the essential requirement for the historical discourse: 'prima condizione per avere storia vera ... è che sia possibile una narrazione'.<sup>86</sup> It is not a coincidence that Hayden White early in his academic career produced a number of works on Croce's thought, among which his *Metahistory* which devotes the last chapter to the theory of history of the Italian philosopher. White's *Metahistory*, published in 1973, is an excellent example of a study on Croce's importance for the idea of history in the 20th century. White associates Croce with intellectual giants such as Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche and their attempt to reformulate a new idea of history. White's view is that Croce is an ironist who tried to counter the debilitating consequences of relativism. For White, Croce saw irony as the only viable position for the modern age. The aim of irony was to avoid skepticism and pessimism<sup>87</sup>. However, White maintains that Croce's ironic attitude was inherently contradictory and likened it to Nietzsche's:

How could one live with a history explained and emplotted in the Ironic mode without falling into that condition of despair which Nietzsche had warded off only by a retreat into irrationalism?<sup>88</sup>

White's work has the great merit, however, of considering Croce as a central figure in the development of contemporary thought, and draws attention to the differences between Croce and the other great philosophers of history. However, one cannot accept White's reading of Croce's thought. The ironic mode, unlike the tragic or the comic, does not incorporate any purposive direction. It does little justice to Croce's insistence on the permanence of the ethico-political dimension of his historiography. Croce's dedication to tradition, far from being ironical, was passionately engaged. In effect, where Croce parts company with postmodernism, at least in its most extreme forms, is in the almost unbridled relativism of some of its

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<sup>86</sup> Croce, *Primi scritti*, p. 38.

<sup>87</sup> '[Croce's] criticism of the historical thinkers of the age was characteristically Ironic: the philosophers of history had very little "historical" sense; the historians lacked in "philosophical" understanding ... For, ironically, Croce maintained, history *was* philosophy and philosophy *was* history, and one could not do history without philosophical consciousness, anymore than one could not do philosophy without historical consciousness.' H. White, *Metahistory*, (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 380.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 378.

protagonists, in their contempt for 'tradition', and his own insistence on the rational dimension of the historian's discourse.

We have seen that Croce did not share the liberal confidence of a progressive history. History has no predetermined plans and the present is not necessarily better than the past or the past than the present. History, in Croce's view, knows degeneration and barbaric periods. Nevertheless, Croce drew attention to the *purposive direction* that history should have in order to preserve its meaning. In this sense Croce talked about history as history of liberty, a process through which we become aware of the historicity of our values and beliefs. The present is the dimension through which we examine the past, and in particular the place of the ethico-political dimension as a fundamental component of historical narrative. Every narration, and most specifically the historical one, has a purpose that transcends the ideological dimension and projects beyond the simple dichotomy between useful and useless, profitable and unprofitable touching on issues linked to our moral sensibilities. It is true that Croce never ceased to insist that he did not intend to encase history within a rigid framework or teleology, but this does not imply that he had an ironical view of the past. Although he foreshadow many of the ways in which postmodernism has attacked grand narratives, if we leave out of the account the strong *purposive* dimensions of historical narration, we miss what might be a valuable corrective to the purely negative or destructive aspects of some postmodernist tendencies. Moreover, we should not make the mistake of assuming that his respect for tradition implied either a conservative attachment to the past, or any predetermined outcomes embedded in tradition. Rather, it reflected an acute awareness of the links between past and present, and the inescapable consequences of the hermeneutic circle.

Given the parallels discussed above between Croce and important figures on the contemporary scene, it is disappointing to find them sometimes even denied in recent comprehensive studies such as that of Roberts. The American scholar recognizes the importance of Croce in relation to many contemporary currents of thoughts. However, Roberts fails to spot the most important affinities of Croce with modern thought, often indicating superficial similarities, as in the case of the comparison that he makes with Hans-George Gadamer and German hermeneutics:

It is striking that Croce, especially compared with Gadamer, seems to play down the need for – and the possibility of – a kind of historical dialogue with those who have lived before. Historical understanding is crucial for Croce, of course; but, just as it is not problematic for him as it is for the Germans, neither is it interesting, challenging, perhaps even liberating. From Croce's perspective, we are privileged because we came after those who came before, because all that remains real of what they were lives on in us.<sup>89</sup>

Regrettably, this is almost a point by point misinterpretation of Croce's work. In reality, we have seen that Croce was closer to Gadamer's hermeneutics than generally acknowledged. It is thanks to Croce's antimetaphysical approach that one is made aware that 'objectivity' is not the main pursuit in history. Indeed, Croce was among the first to relate history to subjectivity, and his ideas could well inspire historians with an interest in a deeper understanding of the subjective dimension of the way in which historians reconstructed the past, without thereby embracing the skepticism which he was constantly at pains to refute. Indeed, a better understanding of Croce's distinction between a healthy relativism and skepticism still needs to be achieved.

Moreover, it has been shown that he put the dialogue with the past at the core of his historical theory. From the very outset of his career Croce reflected on the role of *subjectivity* and *pre-conceptions* in historical discourse, which is very much in tune with contemporary hermeneutics. Indeed for both Gadamer and Croce 'prejudices' are essential in our perception of history.<sup>90</sup> They both stressed that without prejudices one cannot construct a historical narrative and both had very similar views on the role of tradition. They shared the idea that tradition far from being a static corpus of past events, is a powerful force which conditions and shapes our present life; hence, the importance of a constant critique which allows us to re-visit and re-assess the past in the light of our present concerns. Another common trait between Gadamer and Croce is their rejection of the dichotomy conservatism- radicalism and their arguments for a broader view which encloses the two in the same movement of restoration and regeneration:

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<sup>89</sup> Roberts, *Benedetto Croce*, p.341.

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Gadamer's historical-philological reconstruction of the various meanings of 'prejudice' in *Truth and Method*, pp. 277-300, where he analyzes the Enlightenment denigration of the notions of 'authority' and 'tradition'. The positive 'prejudices' which Gadamer urges the historian to make critical use of are in effect the ethico-political components of the sensibility the historian takes with him or her from the present in the 'fusion of horizons' with the past.

Even the most genuine and solid tradition does not persist by nature because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is essentially preservation, such as is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one. For this reason, only what is new, or what is planned, appears as the result of reason. But this is an illusion. Even where life changes violently, as in ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the supposed transformation of everything than anyone knows, and combines with the new to create a new value. At any rate, preservation is as much a freely chosen action as revolution and renewal.<sup>91</sup>

When one looks closely at the concept of tradition, one realizes that this historical flow can be also conceptualised as the result of complex struggle and negotiation between competing forces which all strive to achieve a narrative which can never be definitive since it changes with the requirements of the epoch in which it is being recounted.

It is truly astonishing that there is no study on the influence that Croce might have exerted on hermeneutics. A recent book by the scholar Maurizio Ferraris, *Storia dell'Ermeneutica*, published in 1998, is a good example of this neglect. Indeed, Ferraris never mentions Croce even when similarities of themes and issues with those discussed strike the reader familiar with Croce as obvious. The effect is an enormous gap in the history of philosophy. This neglect of Croce, and in general of Italian philosophical thought during the first half of the twentieth century, far from being accidental, is the result of a conscious decision which betrays a deep-seated hostility on the part of Italian academia for Croce. In fact, Italy has not been able to produce thinkers of the calibre of Croce, Gentile or Gramsci in the post World War Two era, and the constant disregard of these thinkers can be read as a worrying sign of a country incapable of a mature settling of accounts with a patrimony of considerable intellectual depth.

The reasons behind this attitude towards Croce are various: the heritage of an ideologically-charged cultural environment initiated with the aftermath of the Second World War, the inferiority complex that a relatively young European country like Italy has in relation to the German, French, English and American traditions, and

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<sup>91</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 281-82. Like Croce, Gadamer also came under fire from thinkers of the Left who interpreted his defence of the importance of tradition as inherently conservative. In this connection, his polemical engagement with Habermas is of particular interest. See, in particular, his



finally the monopoly exerted by a coterie of 'crociani' in Naples who treat the philosopher as a holy relic to be preserved from the contamination of the present. A series of subliminal cultural preconceptions has led post World War Two Italian intellectuals to read Croce as a believer in, and builder of, 'grand narratives'. Liceo textbooks on philosophy have consistently presented summaries of Croce as the pre-war idealist system-builder, somewhat detached from the reality of the historical process. The construction of an Olympian, systematic and idealist Croce was a process which began just after the philosopher's death. As a matter of fact, this image was created and spread with the help of a group of fervent Croceans through their theoretical reconstruction of the philosopher's thought.

Carlo Antoni in his *Commento a Croce*, published in 1955, focused almost exclusively on the systematic aspects of Croce's thought, providing a solid theoretical basis for future commentators. His important *Commento* remains one of the most widely read works in Croce criticism. The centre of gravity of Antoni's Croce was the *Filosofia dello Spirito* taken as a new *Weltanschauung*. The Crocean scholar insisted particularly on the moral significance of Croce's work. Justice, beauty and truth were the eternal values around which the philosopher's idealist speculation revolved. These values, according to Antoni, were undermined after the Second World War and replaced by a darker notion of history and its aims.<sup>92</sup>

Another contribution to the profile of a moralistic Croce came with a hagiographical biography penned by his life-long collaborator and friend Fausto Nicolini in 1962. His *Croce*, published by the Unione Editori Torinesi, contributed to strengthening and extending further the image of a peaceful and aloof Neapolitan thinker able to rise above the turbulent events surrounding him. Nicolini's prose is interspersed with expressions such as 'Il nostro Benedetto', which gives the book a strange sense of over-familiarity. The biographer indulges in portraying Croce as a conservative and stern husband and father, conveniently overlooking the thirteen-year 'illicit' relationship of the philosopher with Angelina Zampanelli, and depicting Croce as a fierce anti-communist. The result is a biography at times excessively anecdotal written in the tones of a passionate devotee.<sup>93</sup>

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response to Habermas's charges in H-G Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (California: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 26-38.

<sup>92</sup> C. Antoni, *Commento a Croce* (Venice: Neri Pozza, 1955), pp. 105-07.

<sup>93</sup> This is how Nicolini reports his first encounter with Croce: 'Mi vidi venire incontro un uomo agile, vivace, gioviale, sorridente, un uomo dai baffetti biondi: un uomo che, dall'aspetto giovanile, sebbene

Another ‘orthodox’ Crocean, Alfredo Parente, founded in 1964 the *Rivista di studi crociani*, a journal with a vast international readership (the periodical even had subscribers from Japan) which lasted until 1984, the year of Parente’s death. Parente’s laudable aim was to keep the thought of Croce alive and discuss the philosopher’s main theoretical issues.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, *Rivista* had the great merit of keeping critical studies, bibliographies, articles, and essays on Croce constantly updated for twenty years. However, despite the indisputable scholarship of the editor and his collaborators, the journal, extremely polemical in relation to contemporary philosophy, was perceived as the fortress of hardcore Croceanism and consolidated the image of a Croce prejudicially hostile to new philosophies. Indeed, *Rivista* opened a yawning chasm between the Croceans and the rest of the philosophical community, confining the study of Croce to the South of Italy, and inhibiting any constructive dialogue between his philosophy and the main European philosophical currents. Naples became the hallowed sanctuary where the ideas of the philosopher were defended and perpetuated. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the overwhelming majority of studies on Croce in Italy have come and are still coming from the capital city of Campania.<sup>95</sup>

More recently, scholars such as Gennaro Sasso and Michele Maggi have promoted the image of Croce as a classical philosopher to be read within a systematic framework. All attempts at alternative readings of Croce have been dismissed as non-philosophical and defective.

The problem with ‘crociani’ like Sasso and Maggi is their obsession with unity in Croce’s thought. According to these interpreters the coherence of the Italian philosopher should be sought in his adherence to an idealistic perspective in relation to which his itinerary was in reality transgressive. Furthermore, for Maggi ‘Croce è sempre “logico” e la sua è sempre “filosofia dello spirito” and one can find ‘la storia autentica e segreta di un pensatore come Croce’ only ‘andando a fondo nella

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contasse allora trentasette anni, mostrava di non esser giunto nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita; un uomo, infine, che indossava un gaio vestito chiaro dal taglio inappuntabile.’ Nicolini, *Croce*, p.185.

<sup>94</sup> Parente published the programme of *Rivista di studi crociani* in 1962: ‘L’idea di formare il periodico che qui si annuncia è nata dal proposito di dare un nuovo impulso allo studio dell’opera di Benedetto Croce e di costruire un punto d’incontro di quanti già sparsamente attendono o pensano di volgersi a quello studio.’ R. Cavaliere, ‘Il dibattito sullo storicismo nella “Rivista di studi crociani” (1964-1984) *Archivio di storia della cultura- Quaderni*, Nuova Serie 3 (Naples: Liguori, 2002), pp. 413-27 (p. 416).

<sup>95</sup> Recently the Neapolitan publishing house Bibliopolis has started to republish, with philological reverence, the whole opus of Croce.

comprensione della sua opera filosofica', otherwise, Maggi argues, the risk is 'un mélange di storia politico-culturale e di storia psicologica.'<sup>96</sup>

However, this study has sought to demonstrate that Croce's writing requires a different reading, which takes into account his hostility towards any grand discourse, and considers the various phases of the philosopher's journey as an attempt to avoid reductionism. The idealistic coherence of Croce's thought is in part the result of those studies which have tended to smooth out its 'contradictions' in order to construct an idealistic framework, which was then considered to be the main source of his thinking. However, I have tried to show that despite the common view of Croce as a system builder, the philosopher's way of thinking was closer to many later- developed aspects in postmodernist and hermeneutical thinking than to 19<sup>th</sup> century Hegelianism.

Thanks to Croce we have come to understand that our idea of history is not based exclusively on the information extracted from documents and primary sources. In reality, historical narrative is rooted in a much more complex process of interpretation of and reflection on historical remains. Indeed, historians do not reconstruct 'objective facts' through the deciphering of historical remains. Nor is there some historical 'being-in-itself' that is increasingly revealed to a passively receptive subject. Croce's appropriation of tradition is seen as a genuine dialogue in which an understanding emerges that is located in neither side by itself. Croce's approach does not allow us to draw an 'exact image' of the past, but strengthens our understanding of problems of historical methodology and encourages us to engage more closely with the dimension of historical time. Those familiar with the contemporary debate between scientific and narrative history will see how Croce can play a major role in the epistemological debate between historians and philosophers. I believe that Croce's work represents a key-element in 20th century debate on history and should now be read in the context of ongoing critical concerns with historical methods of analysis.

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<sup>96</sup> M. Maggi, 'Nuove prospettive per Croce? ', p.11.

## CONCLUSION

The thesis started by analyzing the reasons for Croce's widespread neglect in post-war Italy, connecting them to the extremely charged political atmosphere of the period of reconstruction. The agenda of the Communists, led by Palmiro Togliatti, was to marginalize Croce in order to create a new political, social, and cultural order. Moreover, the strength of the attack carried out by 'progressive' intellectuals of the calibre of Gramsci, Bobbio, Garin, and Abbate, deeply affected the reception of Croce. Indeed, despite several positive points emerging from these critiques, it was Abbate's which seemed to summarize those of the others. The result was a powerful cultural assault on Croce.

There were also other forces which were eager to dismiss Croce as a conservative and out-of-date thinker, namely 'neoiluministi' such as Geymonat and Abbagnano. An analysis of the strategy used by these theorists took us to the very root of the most widespread interpretations of Croce's work: Hegelian idealism, conservatism, provincialism, obsession with system, prejudicial hostility towards the social and analytical sciences.

The political environment in post-war Italy was not favourable to a careful assessment of the positive features of Croce's philosophy, and the *cumulative* effect of these attacks was extensive. Very rapidly, the myth of the 'Olympian' Croce was created.

The second chapter sought to demonstrate how readings of Croce as a marginal and conservative thinker were mistaken. Indeed, Croce's ideas developed in an extremely cosmopolitan environment, and far from being insular, were part of a broader European debate. I also identified what I think is the hallmark of Croce's theory of history, namely his *antimetaphysical method*. It was demonstrated that Croce's aim was to devise an approach to history and literature which rejected metaphysics, which, in the eyes of the philosopher, represented the futile aspiration of philosophy to be concerned with 'ultimate reality', or, in Croce's words, the 'problema fondamentale'. After an analysis of his first attempt to theorize the nature of history, 'La storia sussunta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte', it became clear that Croce was entering a debate on history which involved the whole European continent, and specifically Germany. Thus, Croce's debut in 1893, far from being provincial, was an integral part of a debate on a number of issues relating to the nature of history that is still going at the present time. In fact, in his first paper, Croce addressed a

number of crucial problems on the status of history: the role of *narrative* and *subjectivity* and the distinction between history and the exact sciences. Moreover, it was demonstrated that Croce did not have a prejudicial view on positivism and the social sciences and, contrary to much Crocean mythology, he was extremely suspicious of Hegel's thought.

The encounter with Marxism and its consequent 'deconstruction' confirmed Croce's antimetaphysical posture. Indeed, the Italian philosopher conceived Marxism as an effective empirical method to be applied to historiography by stark contrast with his friend Giovanni Gentile, who saw Marx as a system-builder similar to Hegel. In Croce's developing conception of history, economics and power became powerful forces to be taken into account in historical discourse. Thus, Marxism marked a phase of renewed 'realism' in Croce's quest for a suitable methodology of history.

The founding of the journal *La Critica* in 1902 also marked Croce's concern to explore the possibility of a non-reductionist method of analysis for the humanities rather than the revival of the idealist system. Moreover, the antimetaphysical intentions of the Italian philosopher were clearly stated in the programme of *La Critica*.

The polemical exchanges through letters and essays between Croce and his friend-collaborator Gentile enabled me to illustrate the dissimilarity of views of the two thinkers on philosophy, culture and politics. Moreover, I showed how the alleged empathy between the two was the result of a superficial, and perhaps ideological, reading of their association. Indeed, if Gentile was obsessed with the establishment of an all-encompassing idealistic philosophy to be applied in all fields of knowledge and politics, Croce on the other hand, made clear from the very outset that his 'idealismo critico' or 'realistico' was only a *tool* to be applied to historiography and literature and was not intended as a *Weltanschauung*. Furthermore, Croce, despite the presentational structure of some of his books, rejected the idea of a 'systematic philosophy'.

In chapter three, after giving a brief account of the historical framework within which Croce's ideas were formed, I defined Croce's strategy of constructing an *antimetaphysical epistemology*. By now, it was clear to Croce that in order to theorize an immanent conception of history he had to devise a non-reductionist epistemology. I read the three volumes of the 'Filosofia dello Spirito' as his attempt to draft this epistemology. Aesthetics, Logic, Economics, and Ethics, in Croce's view, encompass

the broad fabric of the four 'modes' through which historians can construct a non-reductionist narrative. My reading of Croce's 'Philosophy of the Spirit' stressed their normative rather than ontological value. In other words Croce's endeavour is regarded as a *technique* for forming critical judgements on history within the contours of one 'mode' at a time. They each share a proportion of explanatory power, and their disarticulation enables the historian to calibrate their usefulness according to the nature of the historical events discussed. Any attempt to provide a total historical explanation according to an all-embracing vision of reality is a pure metaphysical fantasy.

The idea that Croce created a method prejudicially hostile to science has also been refuted. The Italian philosopher acknowledged the necessity of scientific thought and did not underrate its achievements. However, he was not willing to apply the scientific method to history and the arts. Indeed, in his definitive version of *Logica* (1909) Croce made clear that history could not be reduced to an empiricist set of rules, since the narrative and the aims of this discipline are profoundly different from those of the exact sciences. In tune with the development of 'historicist' thought in Germany pioneered by figures such as Dilthey, Rickert and Windelband, Croce drew a distinction between science, which is concerned with exactitude, and history in which the concept of truth and values play a crucial role. It is in this context that Croce explored the importance of subjective judgements in historical discourse. If for the scientist 'objectivity' is a major requirement for research, the historian has to acknowledge the presence of the subjective element which needs to be taken into account in the historical narrative. Furthermore, Croce underlined the interdependence of concepts and their historical genesis, denying any aprioristic approach to our understanding of history. This can be read as another example of Croce's antimetaphysical posture.

For the Italian philosopher the historian cannot have a simple empirical approach to the past, since there are many other elements to be taken into account. Historical enquiry requires a more complex method which includes the rhetorical, the logical, the economic and the ethical dimensions. Furthermore, one of the most important tasks for the historian is to bring to light the historical framework in which concepts are created and relate them to the present.

Chapter four analyzed the historical climate in which Croce's ideas developed, and related them to his need for an epochal breaking open of conceptual horizons. The

Great War and the general disorientation of intellectuals in Italy and Europe spurred Croce on to clarify further his position on the method of philosophy and the role of history. Once again, Croce reiterated on several occasions that his work should not be read as an attempt to encapsulate the complexity of the world but seen as a simple tool to understand history and the arts. Indeed, in 1915 he firmly rejected the interpretation of his work as 'systematic' and began to show a marked preference to write in the form of articles, essays and marginalia in contrast to his earlier treaties and 'systematic' volumes. I also showed how ill-founded was the image of a Croce holding himself aloof from events. The itinerary of his intellectual trajectory, and a reading of his epistolary, gave us a very different perception of the Italian thinker.

Croce, like the most perceptive minds of the time, realized that Europe had entered a new phase of its history which required a radical reappraisal of its reading.

*Teoria e storia della storiografia* (1917) marked a watershed in Croce's research since here he drew the conclusions of his antimetaphysical method. The metaphysical attitude, with its obsessive desire to find the key to interpreting the world in one fundamental problem, had to be replaced by a methodology in which concepts and their historical genesis had to be closely related. In this sense Croce defined *philosophy as methodology of historiography*.

Writing within a historical setting with strong roots in the Scholastic religious tradition, Croce frequently associated 'metaphysical' with the theological notion of transcendence. He advocated the need for a new secular 'faith' which rejected all forms of transcendence in favour of the analysis of concrete problems. In this sense, philosophy ceased to be a 'theological' discipline and became a tool to be applied to specific issues. The consequence of this conception was a broadening of philosophy, which was no longer a specific discipline but rather a critical reflection on the methods of any given discipline. This entailed the disappearance of the 'philosophus purus'. Moreover, historical experience became the terrain on which knowledge is tested. There is no final meaning to be discovered in the world. Philosophy is a critical method to be applied to specific problems which change with time, with the nature of research, and with the interests of a given social and cultural situation.

If there is some defence to be found for the 'idealist' interpreters of Croce in the form, and occasional idealist lexical lapses, in his earlier writings, this is unambiguously no longer the case after his *Teoria e storia della storiografia*. First, for the Italian philosopher there is no absolutely defining concept in history. Croce

firmly rejected any aprioristic interpretation of history. History is seen as an open-ended process to be constantly discussed and negotiated. Hence, there is no 'philosophy of history' or definitive historical account, which is the opposite of Hegel's conception.

The other original feature of Croce's thinking is his view on tradition, which is no longer seen as a monolith but rather a flow of loosely articulated events with which we need to relate our present situations if we are to understand them. We have a genuine awareness of our thoughts and actions when we are able to write a history of them; and tradition, seen as their dynamic repository, plays a crucial role in this never-ending reconstruction of the past. Indeed, the core of Croce's antimetaphysical method lies in this constant dialogue-polemic with the past. His analyses of Enlightenment, Romanticism and Positivism are all examples of this dialogue with tradition.

Croce's critique of Enlightenment was in tune with this antimetaphysical method, rather than the sign of an alleged antidemocratic attitude. Enlightenment with its detachment from history and its faith in universal reason and atemporal laws, was for Croce a clear example of a metaphysical posture. Indeed, Croce pointed out that institutions and values are not timeless, but embodied in a given social and cultural framework or 'epoca storica'.

Croce also explored the ethico-political aspects and practical repercussions of historical discourse. History began to be observed from its practical side. During this period he developed his reflections on historiography in its relation to ethics, politics and power. We saw how Croce's reflections were misinterpreted and labeled as conservative or even proto-fascist. In reality, Croce was reflecting on the relations and tensions between civil society and state. He insisted on the fact that there is an inherent tendency in society for control to be exerted by a minority. It was easy enough to construct an interpretative line of continuity in Italy going back to the elite theories of Pareto and Mosca. But Croce's antimetaphysical posture and his quest for a more open form of historiography was the real drive behind his analysis of politics, power and ethics. Gramsci made use of these reflections on civil society and state to construct his concepts of 'hegemony' and 'organic intellectual'.

Like Marx, Croce acknowledged the presence of an ideological element in the historical narrative. However, he also recognized the existence of an 'ethical mode' which was related to but distinct from the ideological. Croce maintained that ethics



and politics are in dialectical relation, namely one implies the other but we need to distinguish the two domains. Neither did he underestimate the importance of economics.

After the advent of Fascism Croce was led to place emphasis on the ethical mode which drew out in more detail important implications in his antimetaphysical conception of history. Every historical discourse has, for Croce, an ethico-political element which, with the rhetorical, logical and economic, is fundamental to the construction of the idea of 'truth'. However, the ethico-political element is not a privileged dimension and above all should not degenerate into a sort of moralistic historiography.

The last section of chapter four was devoted to the tensions between Croce's innovative theory of history and his own historiography. We have seen that despite some undeniable limitations Croce's major historical work contains numerous original aspects which have often been overlooked. I examined in particular the polemical context within which these histories were written. During this turbulent period Croce was concerned with the promotion and development of critical ideas which would contribute to shaping the history of Italy and Europe. Moreover, we have seen that Croce's *Storia d'Europa* should be read as a critique of 19<sup>th</sup> century Liberalism rather than a glorification of it.

Chapter five analyzed the latest developments of Croce's antimetaphysical method and his emphasis on the concept of history as contemporary ('every history is a contemporary one'). Before examining Croce's theoretical position I gave a short description of the historical framework within which Croce's ideas were developed. I challenged the received reading of Croce as a kind of 'lay pope' and pointed out that during the Fascist era he was strongly criticized by different groups such as the 'gentiliani' and the neo-thomists, who had a powerful influence in Italian academia. He had a difficult time during the Fascist dictatorship and his relatively privileged position as the unofficial leader of the opposition was counterbalanced by a constant threat to his life and work. Moreover, his work-notes show that he was following the fate of his country and the antifascist movement with great trepidation. Croce also played a crucial role in the immediate post World War Two period. This once again contradicts the image of a philosopher detached from events. Croce's distrust for definitive solutions was also reflected in his political views. He regarded politics as a practical sphere with no dogmatic or permanent solutions. In any given situation,

political practice should be conducted with an eye to what is to be historically effective, rather than according to the dictates of an ideology. This is the reason why, when Communism took the path of totalitarianism, he became a fierce opponent of it. Croce did not like 'grand master plans', whether political or theoretical.

In reality Croce's writings, in tune with his antimetaphysical approach to reality tried to understand events instead of pigeon-holing them into a ready-made aprioristic system. This is particularly marked in his later writings, where he reflected on the relations between history and action, clarifying his immanent conception of history with its strong purposive dimension. Here, he related history to liberty. History became a process of liberation at different levels: individual, collective and in the realm of ideas. Indeed, for Croce, history frees the individual from the 'burden of the past', yielding a better awareness of the present, creating awareness for the collectivity and preparing the ground for new ideas and action. There is a great distance here between Croce's conception of the world and that of Hegel and Marx. Croce maintained that history did not determine action but prepared it. In the Italian philosopher there is an open-ended conception of history which is not present in Hegel or Marx. Indeed, Croce maintained that we need constantly to reconceptualize and revitalize history in the light of the present. There is no eschatology or final end of history.

Croce also talked about the need for a rational history. Rationality in history does not imply a sort of determinism or logicity in historical events themselves. He was simply claiming the right of the historian to construct a narrative based on a critical approach rather than a religious, mythological or metaphysically determined one.

Moreover, we have seen that Croce's vision of history aimed to transcend the dichotomy 'optimism-pessimism'. The polemic with Existentialism should be read in this context. Indeed, for Croce, Existentialism was an attempt to escape into a skeptical metaphysics disengaged from the world. If history is to be a process of liberation from the past and the limitations of the present, for both individual and society, there is little room for pessimism. However, we have seen that Croce was equally hostile to optimistic readings, since his vision of history contemplated arrest and regression and was not linear or teleological.

The last part of chapter five was devoted to relating Croce's thought to the present. I have drawn attention to similarities with aspects of postmodernism and with

contemporary Hermeneutics. Croce's antimetaphysical method in history anticipated the same suspicion of 'grand narratives'. There is no overarching system but a number of interpretative problems emerging from the present. In this connection Croce also anticipated Gadamer's critique of 19<sup>th</sup> century historicism, and argued that the historian's own cultural milieu and perspectives, far from being 'suspended' in a futile attempt to divest one's ability to think imaginatively of the very conditions which make this possible, should be used productively to link our understanding of the past with the present. Croce's notion that all history is contemporary, an idea repeated by Gadamer, forms the basis of the latter's 'fusion of horizons'. Moreover, Croce historicized the role of philosophy by insisting that it should cease attempting to define any universal laws of reality, but instead be a critical endeavour to uncover the problematic components of our historical experience.

Croce raised some issues which are still at the centre of discussion about history and its status. Like Foucault, Croce rejected the idea of 'total history' replacing it with specific areas of research. This emphasis on narration, almost entirely opaque to Croce's contemporary readership, is now seen, by postmodernists and others, as an essential tool for articulating the different strands of historical discourse, and avoiding all forms of reductionism in the process. Moreover, Croce's ethico-political stance, culminating in the concept of liberty could well provide an antidote to the extremes of skepticism to which some forms of postmodernism are prone. Rather than 'libertarian', Croce's liberty, with its ethical dimension is a constant recall to the seriousness of the historian's task, if, in the present, we wish to consolidate the gains from the past and possibly recover some useful 'debris' in the process. In the current debate on the status of history, Croce's voice is one which could be recovered with profit.

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