

# The renewal of the ethical-political conception of historical studies

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**Abstract:** This essay proposes to analyse aspects and issues of the ethical-political paradigm of historical studies, starting from the teaching of Benedetto Croce in the early twentieth century up to the developments of the Italian historiographical panorama in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Twentieth century; Historiography; Ethics and Politics; Liberalism; Socialism

In its initial phase, first marked by the privileged history/philosophy nexus, then by the bursting onto the intellectual scene of the social sciences, the Italian tradition of twentieth-century historical studies was undoubtedly pervaded by the fruitful work of Benedetto Croce. The lively season of the “religion of freedom” and liberalism constituted the emblematic source of Croce’s ethical-political historiography, which was propagated in the national and international context over the course of a century. Croce dissected the great questions of European civilization and affirmed the principles of modern freedom in the general framework of historical event.<sup>1</sup>

In the “new Italy” of the postwar Republican era the Crocian model became the object of severe criticism. Croce was accused of having provoked a “provincialization” of Italian culture and of having offered historical reconstructions intimately connected to the history of the victors and not of the vanquished, to the vicissitudes of the ruling classes and not of the subordinate classes; and again, to the history of ideas and “spiritual processes” and not, rather, to material history, of socialism for example, and of class struggle.<sup>2</sup> In this summary process Croce was pointed to as the perfect agent of reactionaryism and historical regression in comparison with the formidable energy fueling the scientific progress that in the meantime was opening unprecedented scenarios of historical investigation.

In such a panorama, particularly related to the 1960s, “Gramscism”, which arose on the foundations of the methodology offered by Croce, later radically superseded, took

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<sup>1</sup> See Galasso (2008: 113).

<sup>2</sup> Ivi: 119-ss.

overpowering hold in the dominant groove of the Marxist shockwave, which made use of cultural contaminations and the influence of the French “Annales”.<sup>3</sup>

With its close confrontation of several disciplinary levels, the “Annales” represented the manifesto of the long life of human history, and this meant digging a polemical furrow against the traditional forms of *événementielle* history.<sup>4</sup> The suggestions and interests of the new trend that had arrived in Italy and was immediately juxtaposed with the Marxist method were picked up in the early 1970s by influential historians – among them Alberto Caracciolo and Alberto Tenenti – who, directed by Ruggero Romano<sup>5</sup> and Corrado Vivanti, gave birth to the project of *Storia d’Italia*, a collective work of undisputed value, which, when from its presentation in the mid-1970s, was seen as an important and comprehensive scientific-cultural operation capable of representing a profound turning point, both in content and methods, in the study of history. It was published in several volumes by the publisher Giulio Einaudi and for years enjoyed a great success.<sup>6</sup> There was no shortage, however, of those who bitterly contested its scientific criteria<sup>7</sup>: French *nouvelle histoire*, with which the *Storia d’Italia Einaudi* was imbued, together with the perspective of Marxist exegesis, was accused of taking away the full autonomy of the historical sciences and of contributing to the loss of centrality of the *homme*, even though it was man himself who figured, at least originally, as it were, as the privileged focus of its investigations.

This approach to the most pregnant themes of Crocian historiography, capable as it is of giving life to pervasive cultural paths of a certain idea of history, and despite the repeated attempts made by his adversaries to erase attributions and motives of his own ethical-political plan, can then serve to fill an evident vulnus with respect to a fervent activity of intellectual and civil commitment, such as that exercised with passion and acrimony by Croce.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the scope of this tradition appears today to have been dissolved in the oblivion of memory in the face of a reality deprived of traditional ideals and precipitated into an eternal “presentism”, within which the “cancel culture” exercises the deleterious function of liquidating the most varied representations and images of history.<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, a volume edited by Giulio Talini<sup>10</sup> and promoted by the “Circolo Roselli” Foundation chaired by historian and politician Valdo Spini, presents itself in these times of evident cultural decadence as a very timely initiative, oriented to remove that “iron curtain” that seems to have kept the model of idealist historiography caged in for some time. The book has the undoubted merit of bringing «a non-superficial attention - as Talini himself points out in the Introduction - to ethical-political historiography and

<sup>3</sup> Schools and magazines were founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and Henri Pirenne. After 1956, the year of Febvre’s death, the historian Fernand Braudel picked up the baton flanked by Jacques Le Goff, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Pierre Nora and Michel Vovelle.

<sup>4</sup> See Braudel (1949); it. transl.: Braudel (2002). The methodological principles of the historiography of the “Annales” are made explicit in the work. See also Braudel (2016).

<sup>5</sup> A recent review of his craft as a historian is in Musi (2022b).

<sup>6</sup> See Musi (2018).

<sup>7</sup> Specifically, see Romeo (1974); also in Romeo (1991a: 203-205).

<sup>8</sup> See Galasso (2002).

<sup>9</sup> See Imbruglia (2022: 54). The nefarious consequences of “presentism” on the current nodes of national politics were effectively discussed by Rolando (2023: pp. 31-34).

<sup>10</sup> See Talini (2022a).

the trajectories of its epigones [...] in order to rethink the transformative potential in contemporary democracies of culture and so-called sapient, who are increasingly deprived of intermediate spaces between mass media popularization and academic *turris eburnean*» (Talini 2022b: 18).<sup>11</sup>

The publication makes use of the contributions from scholars representing different academic-disciplinary fields of historical-political knowledge: Nadia Urbinati's essay gives an account of the role of intellectuals in modern Italy; Girolamo Imbruglia's essay critically dwells on the fate of Crocian historicism. If Simone Visciola's article is in charge of illustrating the figure of Nello Rosselli<sup>12</sup> between historical research and political struggle, Angelo d'Orsi's provides for his part to illuminate the phases of Antonio Gramsci's theoretical-political commitment. Instead, Massimo Mastrogregori, Antonella Dallou and Marta Herling focus their writings on Federico Chabod's historiographical eclecticism. Silvia Berti portrays Franco Venturi as a great historian of boundless culture; Talini instead clarifies the stages of Furio Diaz's cultural journey. Valdo Spini and Adriano Prosperi outline the ideal and historical-religious project of Giorgio Spini's work. Aurelio Musi outlines the salient stages of historian Giuseppe Galasso's diligent cultural and political commitment. And finally, Zeffiro Ciuffoletti, at the conclusion of the work, deals with the contemporary nature of the ethical-political method.

In short, all the authors have skillfully illuminated the lives of personalities who were particularly active in Italy in the second half of the 20th century, of personalities who through the gears of the Crocian paradigm developed aspects, moments and problems of the modern and contemporary age, recomposing them in the infinite dialectical process of history. They also contemplated in this sense the work of Gaetano Cozzi, Sergio Bertelli, and Leo Valiani,<sup>13</sup> who, coming from different human experiences and political militancy, found themselves united in the convergence at the center of the Crocian framework.

However, some of these intellectuals gradually distanced themselves from this methodology as demonstrated by the case of Chabod, who after the conclusion of his militancy in the Action Party (in whose events Valiani himself had moreover taken part), in the late 1940s-early 1950s, in fact, distanced himself from the cultural guidelines offered by Croce's magisterium.<sup>14</sup>

Although the dense and substantial volume by no means exhausts the overall scope of the historical tradition of idealism, it intends to inaugurate – as Talini points out – a first «yard of research aimed at clarifying [...] the historical and intellectual scope of this very rich and varied historiographical strand» (Talini 2022b: 17). A significant drawback of the work is, however, the absence of one of the most vigorous wits in the intellectual history linked to the Croce tradition, Rosario Romeo.

In association with Galasso,<sup>15</sup> Romeo was the protagonist of a progressive season of studies in the style of Croce,<sup>16</sup> nourished by the continuous and in-depth confrontation

<sup>11</sup> More generally see Pertici (2018).

<sup>12</sup> See also Brancaccio (2021).

<sup>13</sup> See for example Valiani (1984).

<sup>14</sup> For these specific aspects see Chabod (1952: 473-530).

<sup>15</sup> See Musi (2022a: 271). See also Barbagallo, Trotta (2021).

<sup>16</sup> See Pescosolido (2023: 94-107).

with the economic and legal bases of the thought of the historian Gioacchino Volpe,<sup>17</sup> as evidenced in his fundamental studies on the essential nodes – political-institutional, socio-economic and cultural – of the liberal state<sup>18</sup> and on the outcomes of the national unification process, aimed at refuting, in a liberal-democratic approach, the historiographical assumptions of Marxism interpreted by the speculations of Emilio Sereni. Sereni had resumed the discourse of Gramsci about the reactionary parabola of the Italian Risorgimento and the so-called “failed agrarian revolution”.<sup>19</sup>

Galasso and Romeo are, therefore, to be counted among the scholars who were more adept and also more inclined to give Crocian idealism a more modern physiognomy, updating and transforming its historiographic spirit. Both Galasso, a member of parliament and father of the important parliamentary law on the Italian landscape,<sup>20</sup> and Romeo, a member of the European Parliament in one of the first experiences of community life on the “old” continent, were more than animated by a lively political passion, which they both practiced in the ranks of the Republican Party of Ugo La Malfa and Giovanni Spadolini.<sup>21</sup> At that time there was a strong public interest combined with the exercise of a prolific journalistic activity.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Giuseppe Giarrizzo, a Sicilian like Romeo, is also absent from the book: a socialist leader, Giarrizzo was a historian of merit belonging fully to the theoretical framework of Crocian thought.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, Spini and Talini’s meritorious proposal, to reflect on the perspicuous reasons for Croce’s legacy, seems ultimately to locate itself on the terrain of a proper polemic with regard to the “post-ideological tendencies” of today’s historical culture. In fact, the claims of this sort of historiographical “newness,” by appealing to self-referential specialism, end up being clothed with a negative stamp that debases «not only historiography, but history itself and the category of historicity as a dimension of reality and thought» Galasso (2008: 34).

Among the intentions of the volume there is a clear aim to emphasize the ethical-political utility of “doing history” in Italy. The methodological specificity of such a version of national historiography, defined by objectives placed in a balanced relationship between the excavation of the past, attention to the present and the prospects of the future,

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<sup>17</sup> The economic-legal address represented a scientific trajectory that was the prerogative of excellent teachers, such as Pasquale Villari and Gaetano Salvemini, as recalled by Ciuffoletti (2022: 283). In this regard see Volpe (1967) and Romeo (1957).

<sup>18</sup> See Romeo (1959). Romeo argued that if the “action on the peasants,” promoted by the democratic movement, had been successful by allowing them to become small and medium landowners, post-unification Italy would have dangerously slipped into an area of structural marginality, such that it would have missed the fundamental opportunity to enter, not as a mere extra, but as a potential protagonist, in the agon of European economic competition: an experience that was instead possible thanks to the industrialist option made its own by the state through targeted protectionist policies launched between the 1870s and 1880s. On the other hand, it was Giorgio Candeloro, the great Gramscian historian of the second half of the twentieth century, who agreed with the liberal Romeo, believing in fact that at the time of the completion of the unification process the social conditions did not exist at all for the “Jacobin function” of the democrats to serve to solve the age-old problem of the southern countryside. See Candeloro (2015: 298-299).

<sup>19</sup> See Gramsci (2001: 1959-2078); and Sereni (1956). On this subject see also Pescosolido (2009: VIII ss.).

<sup>20</sup> See Pollice, Miggiano (2021: 169-187).

<sup>21</sup> See Pescosolido (2021: 236-349).

<sup>22</sup> See Romeo (1991b).

<sup>23</sup> See De Francesco (2023: 103-107). See also Benigno (2016: 153-158).

and supported by fertile theoretical contaminations and new research programs, can undoubtedly help to foster the reconstruction of a powerful moral and political viaticum of the new times, having as its priority the achievement of a strong and plausible alternative representation to offer in contrast to the vacuous fashions of the current cultural landscape, and to write more convincing pages on the rebirth of historical sciences and, in general, on the future of democracy.

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