The rise and fall of Benedetto Croce: intellectual positionings in the Italian cultural field 1944-1947

Article

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The Rise and Fall of Benedetto Croce. Intellectual Positionings in the Italian Cultural Field, 1944-1947

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Abstract

This article evaluates the discourse developed around Benedetto Croce in the Italian cultural periodical press between 1944 and 1947 and it discusses the forms of adversarial discourse and the agents involved in the anti-Croce polemics that unfolded in the Communist party's official cultural journal *Rinascita*. Specifically, this article focuses on a selection of intellectuals who moved away from Crocean idealism to embrace Marxism in order to investigate how their conversion was presented in *Rinascita*.

Keywords: Benedetto Croce; Palmiro Togliatti; Rinascita; Belfagor; PCI; Cultural politics

Introduction

The publication, in 1950, of *Cinquant'anni di vita intellettuale italiana 1896-1946* was intended to celebrate the eightieth birthday of the philosopher and Senator Benedetto Croce. The impressive *Festschrift* assembled in two volumes thirty-two chapters exploring the state of the art of an equal number of disciplines in the humanities each of which had been influenced by Croce's thought. The collection lined up 'illustrious scholars and young researchers, to demonstrate the uninterrupted continuity of [Croce's] action across generations' (Antoni-Mattioli. 1966, I, ix). Bruno Nardi, Arnaldo Momigliano, Federico Chabod, Ettore Paratore, Mario Praz, Giovanni Macchia, Giacomo Devoto, Francesco Flora, and Luigi Einaudi, to name but a few, illustrated how the single disciplines had absorbed Croce's significant incursions into their areas of inquiry since the beginning of the twentieth century, a period suitably characterised by Luigi Einaudi as the 'cinquantennio crociano' (Antoni-Mattioli 1966, II, 352). The official academic culture of the Republic was not only honouring the *Altvater*, but by recognizing Croce's magisterium over the 'lay clerics' and lovers of freedom in the seats of higher learning, it was also making amends for his isolation during Fascism, when universities and learned academies officially turned their back on Croce as a result of his opposition to Mussolini. Most importantly, with the call to younger scholars to contribute to this significant collection, official academic culture intended also to paper over a number of fractures that had emerged within the post-1943 intellectual field. The most conspicuous fracture had been the recalcitrance and disinterest of the 1920s generation with regard to Croce. Anti-fascist intellectuals from this generation responded more readily to the lure of the organized mass politics of the

Communist Party than to the elitist call of the 'party of culture', as Croce famously and repeatedly defined his own Liberal Party after the fall of Fascism.

In March 1944, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Palmiro Togliatti, returned to Italy after an 18-year-long exile, landing in Naples – the epicentre of Crocean culture – at the time under US-control (Ajello 1979, 36-42). Before his arrival, Togliatti had already studiously organized a cultural programme that revolved around the release of Antonio Gramsci's unpublished writings, namely his *Lettere dal Carcere* and the *Taccuini*.[1] The strategic release of excerpts from Gramsci's unpublished letters in *Rinascita*, the cultural journal of the PCI, and the timely republication of some of his work starting in 1947 with Einaudi, constituted the single most important cultural event of the period.[2] This cultural operation quickly galvanised the intellectuals close to the Communist party and persuaded others to join its ranks. The release of these texts also contributed significantly to the erosion of Benedetto Croce's influence over the intellectual field, as the powerful advocacy for cultural engagement that could be derived from Gramsci's work seemed to overcome the many aporetic elements emerging from Croce's philosophical system, which asserted a rigid separation between the field of politics and the field of cultural production.[3] The response of the Liberal bloc against this offensive was varied and often contradictory. In the cultural field, it initially reacted vigorously and coherently to defend Croce's legacy, and organized intellectual forces especially from the older generation in a stand that articulated a cultural alternative to the Marxist advance. A case in point was the journal *Aretusa* (1944-1946). The Croce salon had understood the strategic importance of imprinting on the unstable post-1943 cultural field a sense of direction and, seizing the advantage granted by the liberation of Southern Italy and the support of the US forces, quickly organized with the help of trusted

collaborator Francesco Flora the journal *Aretusa*, which was launched in US-occupied Naples in April 1944. Against this journal, as we shall see, *Rinascita* – founded in Naples in June 1944 – would organize a ruthless campaign of delegitimation.[4]

In the political field, the Liberal bloc had since 1942 given birth to different formations. The short-lived Action Party (1943-1946), heir to Gobetti's and the Rosselli brothers' political vision, the result of the political orchestration of Ferruccio Parri and Ugo La Malfa, and Guido Calogero's intellectual leadership, attracted steadfast Crocean intellectuals of high repute such as Guido Dorso, Adolfo Omodeo and Luigi Russo, thus weakening the intellectual weight of the reconstituted Liberal Party of which Croce was President from 1943 to 1947. Guglielmo Giannini's Common Man's front acted, on the other hand, as a catalyst for the radical and right-wing elements at the fringes of the Liberal bloc and gathered intellectuals who had been vociferous opponents of Croce's stance during Fascism and had supported Mussolini's political agenda. Croce's explanation of Fascism as an illness had been welcomed with a mixed reception, ranging from critical distance and outright rejection in Marxist circles to anodyne acceptance and expedient exploitation in the flanks of reactionary cross-party networks.[5] A more tangible illustration of the distance that had grown between the philosopher and both older and younger generations were the results of the 1946 national elections, which saw Croce unelected in Rome and Milan, and achieving only fifth place in his home town of Naples (Setta 1979, 140-147) while his opponents, the mass party leaders Alcide De Gasperi and Palmiro Togliatti, secured sweeping results across the country.

This article contributes to the understanding of the political and cultural dynamics that accelerated, since the Fall of the regime, what Eugenio Garin (1963,

205) aptly defined the 'Crocean diaspora' and it focusses on the debate between Croce and Marxist intellectuals, some of whom were new entrants in the field of politics, and who developed their intellectual identity in the shadow of Croce's hegemony. While this study will focus in particular on the Communist cultural journal *Rinascita*, I will make appropriate references to the periodical press linked to the Liberal bloc broadly conceived, in order to frame the reach and significance of the Marxist anti-Croce narratives developed between 1944 and 1947. The cultural periodical press endured a quick transformation in the immediate post-war period and served as a platform for both political debate and cultural commentary, and this politically militant interpretation of its mediational role was heavily criticised by Croce, a criticism that led to numerous polemics in the intellectual field. This article will pay particular attention to the press context in which criticism levelled against Croce was articulated and disseminated. This attention is underpinned by the observation that the post-war periodical press acted as a public performative space where individuals and groups verbalised their distance from the Fascist past and competed for new forms and sources of intellectual and political legitimation. My contention is that the periodical press of the period also acted as a platform for emplacement and visibility for an often concurrent verbalization of steadfast allegiance to or critical distancing from, if not outright abjuration of, Croce's cultural politics. Such verbalization was made more urgent by the pressure exerted by the campaign to promote Antonio Gramsci's work, and by the Communists' concerted efforts to be seen as the only untainted enablers for a radically new framework for cultural intervention and engagement for the intellectual class. This article will therefore analyse the debate that ensued between the Liberal bloc and the Communists on Croce's legacy and which developed across the periodical sphere. It will also analyse the narrative of

conversion to Marxist allegiance in key intellectuals of the period and the role played by such a narrative within the debate on the reconstruction. Furthermore, building upon La Rovere (2008), I will specifically address the role played by Marxist criticism of Crocean culture within the competitive discursive context surrounding the legacy of Fascist education and the youth, thereby filling a gap in an otherwise exhaustive account of the youth question in the post-war period.

This study therefore aims to provide a detailed analysis of the role played by the allegiance to, or repudiation of, Croce in the creation of a narrative of generational identity, and to evaluate the patterns of continuity and rupture between the generation of the established, '*naturaliter* Crocean' (Bobbio 1962, 622), cultural operators (born between the end of the nineteenth century and the early 1900s), and the intellectual generation of those born in or just before the 1920s, whence the new or 'renewed' intellectual class of the post-war period will emerge.

The Journal as Vector for Political intervention

In an article published in February 1945 in *La città libera* and shortly afterwards republished in the first issue of *I quaderni della Critica*, Croce spurned the many recent journals displaying an unorthodox mixture of cultural themes with politics. The deriving confusion, arising from improper contamination, was mostly observed in periodicals aligned with 'lay or religiously confessional parties, thus with scarce or no liberal spirit whatsoever, which should leave poetry, philosophy, and history aside, and therefore respect these as universal values for undivided humanity' (Croce 1945, 112).

Croce's position was not new. While he attributed a civic mission to the intellectual and saw a political value which transcended political antagonism in the pursuit of knowledge, Croce had also maintained that culture should not be subordinated to politics. *La critica* (1903-1944) was initially born to serve as a mouthpiece for Croce's aesthetics and his cultivated sense of distinction. During the Regime, it became the only authoritative non-aligned voice in the field of culture due to Croce's international fame, and his role as interpreter of an uncompromising vision of cultural communication, both intrinsically elitist and radically opposed to the totalitarian infiltration of politics in matters of art.[6]

The powerful sense of agency felt by intellectuals and writers in the aftermath of the fall of the regime and the ensuing war of liberation tapped into the many dissenting sentiments that had been diligently dissimulated during the dictatorship. This agency initially fuelled a series of journals and gazettes linked to the on-going experience of resistance. After 1944, this highly fragmented periodical landscape quickly generated cultural outlets that engaged with the radical rethinking taking place in the intellectual field directed at the culture produced during the *ventennio*, and the institutions that presided over cultural production and interpretation during Fascism. This landscape contributed to the formation of a public performative space, where intellectuals of different generations, characterised by different interpretations of anti-fascism and different political allegiances, came together to express their personal shame and regret towards the Fascist past, their will to contribute to the reconstruction of the country, and their desire to communicate a radical re-adjustment of their political ideas after the life-defining experience of war and resistance.

In September 1945, from the pages of one such journal, Luigi Salvatorelli's *La nuova Europa*, Liberal historian Guido De Ruggiero (1888-1948), himself linked to the broad network revolving around Benedetto Croce, defined this vibrancy as 'the most important and visible document of the re-emerging Italian democracy' (De Ruggiero 1994, 61). The result of 'the collaboration between the awakening ancient forces and the emerging new' (ibid., 60), the flourishing and dynamic publishing market across the country quickly arranged itself into two camps. One was a highly organized and belligerent Marxist network of journals, while the other consisted of a more fragmented periodical syndicate revolving around various Liberal-inspired salons.

Croce had pointed his finger against the 'openly tendentious judgements on art, philosophy and history, either purposely or ignorantly unintelligent, available in Marxist journals' (Croce 1945, 112). However, Liberal-inspired journals were also ready to experiment with the hybrid format combining political intervention and cultural commentary, thus tapping into a widely felt dissatisfaction – in Liberal intellectual circles – with the 'intrinsic limitations of Croce's historicism […] bringing to an end one epoch without opening a new one' (De Ruggiero 1945). One such journal was Luigi Russo's *Belfagor*.[7] In an exchange of letters discussing its imminent launch in March-April 1945, Croce had warned Russo about the wisdom of mixing genres. Russo defended his proposal to devote a section of his journal to politics, in order to meet a need for a discussion of modifications of the concept of liberty and the co-dependent changes in political institutions and communities (Cutinelli-Rendina 2014, II, 578-582). Russo was acutely aware that his journal, initially published by the Florence-based Vallecchi and connected to the academic networks located in Pisa and Florence, would share the marketplace with the Liberal-Reformist *Ponte*

and the Marxist *Società*, also based in Florence and unapologetic in their engagement with the field of politics. The first issues of *Belfagor*, especially the "Noterelle e schermaglie" section, would be tinged with a political struggle aimed at countering, at least initially, the Marxist bloc. Increasingly the journal revealed an anti-Crocean disposition in its interpretation of the role of cultural communication. Eventually, from the very pages of *Belfagor* (Russo 1946d), Russo announced his candidature in the 1946 elections in the Movement for Republican Democracy, led by Ferruccio Parri and Ugo La Malfa, a party which had emerged from the break-up in February of that year of the Action Party. Furthermore, the debate on the limits of Crocean idealism, and specifically of Croce's interpretation of cultural politics, which Russo facilitated in his journal from 1947, led Russo himself to embrace Gramsci's positions and to support Gramsci's model of intellectual inquiry.[8]

The political context of the reconstruction had forced a paradigm shift of the forms of cultural communication that impacted also on Croce's own behaviour. Croce's name was associated with many journals that fit the paradigm of contamination between cultural engagement, political propaganda and intervention that was embodied, *exempli gratia*, by the Communist *Rinascita: rivista di cultura e politica*. Deeply connected to Francesco Flora's *Aretusa*, welcomed as author in the pages of Alba De Cespedes's *Mercurio*, his work and influence the object of several articles published in Giovanni Battista Angioletti's *La fiera letteraria*, Salvatorelli's *La nuova Europa*, frequent contributor to Pannunzio's *Risorgimento Liberale*, subsequently linked to Francesco Flora's *Rassegna d'Italia*, senior editor – together with Ettore Paratore and Luigi Einaudi – of *La città libera*, Croce did not disseminate his cultural politics only through the conduit of *I quaderni della Critica*.

Croce's aesthetic positions, seen as legitimising – with their advocacy for the autonomous role of art – the conservative bourgeoisie's distrust of the popular masses, would be subjected to increasing critical scrutiny in the pages of Marxist journals such as *La Rinascita*, *Società, Risorgimento,* and *Politecnico,* where they would be criticised not only as the manifestation of an intrinsically elitist but also as falsely universalist and implicitly illiberal in their political outlook. In these journals, Croce's attitude had been dismissed as 'Olympian', and constantly pitched against the dynamic political action of the party that led the emancipatory struggle of the working class and the concurrent effort to present Gramsci's life and works as a model for active and uncompromising anti-fascism. However, even a cursory glance at the periodical press connected to the Liberal bloc can testify to Croce's far from Olympian stance against his detractors and political adversaries.

In his speeches to the Liberal party, and in response to the Marxist cultural discourse that presented the PCI as the only truly anti-Fascist party, Croce was unapologetic both in presenting the Liberal party as the natural political conduit for the bourgeoisie and in elevating the bourgeoisie to the status of an universal class. This position was limpidly enunciated in his inaugural speech to the 30 September 1945 meeting of the Liberal Party and refracted in numerous interviews and articles published in the journals and newspapers connected to the Liberal bloc: 'The middle class or bourgeoisie is not an economic class, and even less so is the now abhorred capitalist class, but it is the overcoming [superamento] of the economic classes in an ideal office, the impartial office of thought and culture.' (Croce 1963, 241). Against a party promoting aggressively the interests of the proletariat, Croce promoted instead the 'hard-working bourgeoisie […] mental and moral treasure of the Italian people […] the representative of a superior and eternal exigency for a mental and moral life,

and therefore the natural custodian of everybody's freedom' (Croce 1963, 243). For Croce, the PCI vulgarly pitched 'workers of the arm, to combat another order of workers, the workers of the mind' (ibid.). This highly charged interpretation of the potential class conflict ensuing from the rubble of the devastation brought about by war projected the political battle on two intersecting planes: the political field that was concerned with the new state structure, and the intellectual field, where old and new intellectual forces openly saw themselves as the cultural conduits of historically determined social groups. Even though Croce delivered it in a political gathering, this speech had the clear feature of a cultural programme that was being actualised in the practice and critical discourse of many intellectuals who recognized Croce as their source of legitimation.

Despite the political momentum gained by the Democrazia Cristiana, and the catalyst role played by this party for the reformist and reactionary forces, the domestic cultural field did not revolve around the Catholic question, and was not animated by easily distinguishable Catholic public intellectuals. Instead it still pivoted around the figure of Benedetto Croce, and it was against this lay intellectual of international fame, one who ostensibly laid the foundations for a lay culture in Italy, that *Rinascita* would organize a sustained campaign of delegitimization that – between 1944 and 1952, the year in which the philosopher died – would have different peaks of intensity, and inextricably linked, from the journal's first issue, to the campaign to promote Antonio Gramsci as a model for inquiry and resistance.

Cultural polemics, Political Cross-Fire

Palmiro Togliatti introduced *Rinascita*'s programme on the front page of the first issue in 1944. *Rinascita*'s mission was first and foremost pedagogical, with the stated aim to bring 'indispensable theoretical notions' and a 'solid Marxist foundation' to the many militants and new supporters of the PCI. The journal, however, would also provide a space for discussion for those 'elements deriving from the middle class, especially intellectuals', who were increasingly attracted to the Communist Party because of its 'moral and political prestige, both national and international', even if they did not adhere to the Communist Party from 'deep convictions' (Togliatti 1984, 43). Questions of political orthodoxy, of what kind of Marxist education these recruits acquired and how they acquired it, had clear implications for political strategy. Togliatti wanted these new militants to see the extent to which idealist culture had been partly responsible for Fascism. Only by recognising how wrong it was to postulate a watertight distinction between cultural practices on the one hand and the structures of power that gave birth to them on the other, would the new militants be capable of acknowledging the 'historical necessity' of the Communist cultural agenda, characterised by its refusal to separate 'culture from politics, individuals from society, art from real life'. These general propositions led to a specific accusation: 'the first blow to open the road, in the field of thought and culture, to fascist barbarism and degeneration, was struck by the writer who had proclaimed that Marxism had died' (Togliatti 1984, 45). The veiled allusion was of course to Croce who had moved – from the 1890s to the early 1900s – from a position of dialogue with Marxist thought to one that increasingly saw in Marxism a faulty ideology unable to explain the complexities of economic and social life. Croce's stance culminated in the article *Come nacque e come morì il marxismo teorico in Italia (1895-1900*), originally published in 1937 and then strategically

reissued in a 1942 collection edited by Croce's former mentor Antonio Labriola and published by Laterza. Togliatti's allusion to this article was therefore timely, as its recent re-release, together with other anti-Communist and anti-Marxist writings by Croce and his associates, had made it once again topical. Croce's anti-Communist pamphlets confirmed in Togliatti's eyes an old but still contemporary polemical standpoint against the intelligentsia's failure to oppose the advance of Fascism, which he powerfully articulated in his 1923 "La 'intelligenza' italiana" (now in Togliatti 1967, 489-494).[9]

During his Neapolitan sojourn, and as noted by Ajello (1979, 45-49), Togliatti had experienced first-hand the need of the young local intellectual forces for an alternative to Crocean values and cultural practices. He also recognized the prestige that Croce and his salon enjoyed with the American forces. The polemical thrust of the offensive against Croce launched by *Rinascita* in 1944 stemmed from Togliatti's initial relationship with the Neapolitan intellectual community and the pressure of local political debate on one side and, on the other, by the political skirmishes within the governments of National Unity that welcomed both Togliatti and Croce as members. It is precisely this alternation of focuses (from local to national and vice versa) that coloured the content of the 1944 issues and influenced a pattern of adversarial discourse on Croce that was also replicated in subsequent issues and at least until 1947, when the Liberal Party saw its electoral base slashed and the PCI achieve a watershed result. The pattern alternated between outright vitriolic criticism of Croce's role as an intellectual, including his associates and connected cultural enterprises, and a series of articles aimed at engaging with Croce's proposals at a political level when these would be expedient to secure the PCI a more visible role in the government of national unity.

With regard to the cultural prong of the campaign, *Rinascita's* first issue in 1944 inaugurated a complex strategy that included the promotion of Antonio Gramsci's work and critique of the traditional cultural establishment revolving around Croce as well as a subtle political recasting of figures, topics, and tropes specific to Croce's own cultural influence, inquiry, and practice. *Rinascita*'s first issue published an editorial anthology of "Giudizi di Antonio Gramsci su Benedetto Croce" deriving from letters to Tatiana Sucht written in May 1932. These concerned Gramsci's reading of Croce's *Storia d'Europa* and contained an insightful scrutiny of the political function of Croce's reformist intellectual programme and an analysis of Croce's reactionary cultural politics. The anthology was followed by a portrait of Antonio Gramsci penned by Piero Gobetti, the anti-Fascist Liberal thinker, publisher, and martyr who had collaborated with Gramsci and covered, in his *La Rivoluzione liberale*, the workers' unrest in Turin. This piece was aimed not only at amplifying Gramsci's appeal across the political spectrum but also at facilitating the identification of young intellectuals, still entrenched in Crocean idealism, with the discourse of emancipation and pluralism promoted by the review. The expedient patronizing of Liberal martyrs would have a lasting impact on the forms of the anti-Crocean polemic, and in subsequent issues the martyrdom and sacrifice of both Gobetti and Giaime Pintor would be culturally appropriated. This operation did not leave Croce untouched. He responded with a similar claim in his 1947 review of Gramsci's *Lettere dal Carcere*, where he defined the Sardinian 'one of ours'.[10]

The strategy of delegitimization of the Crocean bloc would not be limited to the promotion of Gramsci's work and to strategies of cultural appropriation, but it would also entail frontal attacks against Liberal figures. Togliatti levelled vitriolic criticism against historian and prominent Action Party exponent Guido Dorso, as well

as against literary critic and Liberal intellectual Francesco Flora, was exemplary of a tactic that confronted both the political praxis and cultural politics of the Liberal bloc. Both Dorso and Flora were involved in the journal *Aretusa*. In this respect, *Rinascita*'s polemic with *Aretusa* had an immediate localised and polarizing effect in the Neapolitan cultural field, while also laying the ground for a larger offensive against Croce's influence in the years to come. In the section entitled "La battaglia delle idee", Togliatti's damning reviews of Croce's *Per la storia del comunismo in quanto realtà politica* (published by Laterza in 1943), and of Francesco Flora's *Ritratto di un ventennio* (published in Naples by Macchiaroli in 1944) exposed how Croce and Flora purposefully ignored 'the ferocious class struggle led by Fascists against workers and peasants, where one finds the roots of all future degeneration' (Togliatti 1944c, 31). Croce and Flora fought against Socialism because it was the only antidote to the 'decaying liberalism leading into Fascism' (Togliatti 1944b, 30). Both the cultural alignment and the political undertones of Flora's *Aretusa* continued to be the object of a scathing attack featuring prominently in the third and fourth issues of 1944, ranging from detailed rejections of the journal's content to personal attacks on its director, Francesco Flora, and the journal's source of symbolic legitimation, Croce. In the section "La fiera dei bugiardi", Flora was, for instance, lambasted for "Scrittori e Fascismo" (*Aretusa* 2, 1944) where he discussed alleged patterns of continuity between Mussolini's totalitarianism and Soviet communism. Grossi's "Responsabilità dello scrittore" dissected the inherent conservatism of *Aretusa*'s positions and accused Flora's journal of belonging to a 'long-gone era' and of displaying a 'continuation with a critical system both tendentious and dishonest' (Grossi 1944, 25). Grossi's article ignited a polemic with the Liberal journal *La Città libera* (a publication that was closely linked to Croce) and conversely it found a great

deal of support among Marxist intellectuals. In the fourth and final 1944 issue of *Rinascita*, the article entitled “Arte popolare and non popolare” with the byline G. B. continued the discussion around the historical failure of idealist aesthetic practices (persistently associated with *Aretusa*) whereas Giovanni Pischedda’s “Letteratura fatto umano” polemicized with *Aretusa*’s lack of understanding of the cultural demands of the time. The onslaught against Croce’s intellectual leadership would receive further ammunition by the re-publication in the February issue of Rinascita’s 1945 edition, of Gramsci’s “La questione meridionale” (originally published in 1930 in *Stato Operaio*), and of other important excerpts of his oeuvre previewed in *Rinascita*. Gramsci stated that Croce’s national function, and the greatest achievement of his intellectual reform, was to have detached ‘the Southern Italian radical intellectuals from the peasants, by making them participate in national and European culture, and through this culture become absorbed into the national bourgeoisie and therefore the agrarian bloc’ (Gramsci 1945, 41). This view would not only provide the backbone of the PCI’s adversarial discourse against Croce, but would also inform Togliatti’s concerns with the inherent dangers of cultural internationalization within the question of the role of intellectuals in society. In particular, as we shall see later on, Togliatti exploited Gramsci’s view that with the potentially weakening effect that the intellectuals’ engagement with international culture could have a weakening effect on the pedagogical role of intellectuals with regard to the masses of the nation. The relationship between intellectuals and international culture would be the defining topic in Togliatti and Mario Alicata’s 1946-1947 debate with Elio Vittorini’s *Politecnico* on the pages of *Rinascita*. *Politecnico* would be accused of failing in its national cultural mission and would be indicted for Americanism on the one side and on the other for a too diffuse cosmopolitan outlook. But Gramsci’s analysis of the pre-

Fascist intellectual bloc would not only emerge in Togliatti's polemical discourse but also inflect other *Rinascita*–affiliated intellectuals' pronouncements against Croce and his network.

Generational Narratives

In the course of 1945-1947, many commentators and contributors would give support to Togliatti's authoritative interventions published in *Rinascita* on the failures of idealist philosophy and the responsibilities of Benedetto Croce. Amongst these, Felice Platone (1896-1962) and Natalino Sapegno (1901-1990) on one side, and Lucio Lombardo Radice (1916-1982) and Mario Alicata (1918-1966) on the other, would acquire a distinctive physiognomy, with each group embodying a different affective stance towards the Liberal philosopher. Each of these voices entertained a specific relationship to Croce and each developed a distinct adversarial narrative that contributed to shape their own intellectual identity within the cultural field.

In this respect, Felice Platone's position, similarly to Togliatti's, embodied the stance of Communist militants in the early days, defined by the experience of detention, exile, and participation in the armed resistance. A close collaborator of Gramsci's ever since the days of *Ordine nuovo*, Platone's anti-Crocean contributions can be grouped into two parallel polemical strands. As editor of the thematic edition of Gramsci's writings conceived by Togliatti, he focused one strand on the strategic amplification of any Gramscian reference to and criticism of Croce's intellectual role in Italian culture. His second strand was instead eminently political, and characterised by an expedient engagement with and criticism of the Liberal Party's political proposals, whenever party strategy felt the need for it. Platone alternated

with Togliatti in the presentation of previews from the ongoing publication of Gramsci's work in *Rinascita* and in this guise he penned noteworthy editorials that were nourished by his on-going editorial work, such as "Relazione sui quaderni dal Carcere. Per una storia degli intellettuali italiani". In this 1946 article, Platone emphasised Gramsci's analysis of Croce's function within the cultural front during fascism. In so doing, Platone also brought up to date Gramsci's criticism of Croce's cultural practice by drawing parallels with contemporary political debate. This strategy was intended to confirm Gramsci's perceptive reading of the political project behind Croce's idealism and to alert the reader about the real aims of the Liberal bloc's strategy in limiting the PCI's historical role in the reconstruction (Platone 1946, 86-87).

Platone's "Come muore uno stato liberale" (published in the November 1945 issue of *Rinascita*) reflected concerns with patterns of damning continuity within the Liberal Party's discourse in the early years of Fascist rule, as well as the party's opposition to a democratization of political engagement between the masses and the state in the post-war period. Taking issue with a series of articles published by Croce in *Risorgimento liberale* in April and May 1945, Platone questioned how truly encompassing and universal was the liberty being promoted by the Liberal party: 'freedom is, prejudicially, freedom for gentlemen […] that is the well-to-do, the landowners, and their clients' (Platone 1945, 227). Furthermore, Platone identified a not always premeditated but no less dangerous association between 'Liberal intellectuals, the liberal politicians who work to keep the workers out of cultural and political life in order to confine them to the circle of merely economic interests, and the thugs of the landowners and of the plutocrats who have the task of destroying the [workers'] movement with violence' (ibid).

The fear of the PCI organizing a mass revolutionary movement was particularly tangible amongst the ranks of the Liberal party. The Liberal weekly *La città libera* had launched in 1945 a referendum open to all free-thinking intellectuals across the political spectrum, in which the leading question was whether 'it [was] possible to adopt restrictive laws against political parties or groups that aim to destroy the Liberal state'. The question itself took for granted that liberalism was intrinsic to the state. *La città libera* published various contributions, ranging from those of the belligerent Guido Gonella and Manlio Brosio, advocating the elimination of the 'forze liberticide' of Socialist inspiration, to those of Mario Scelba, positing the higher ethical call of the Liberal state, and of Ignazio Silone and Leone Cattani, who maintained instead that the very question revealed the unfinished work of liberalism within Italian society, a point made more explicit by Togliatti's contribution to the debate.

If Platone's relationship to Croce was unequivocally adversarial, Natalino Sapegno's intellectual engagement with Croce's aesthetics was instead characterised by a growing critical distance. Unlike Platone, Sapegno had adhered to a more conventional anti-fascism. For academics of his generation, Croce had represented the only conduit for criticism of the Fascist system of oppression, a sign of group distinction, and a demonstrable but safe evidence of non-conformity. Like for many, Sapegno's progressive attraction towards the PCI was prompted by his support to the resistance groups where many of his pupils were involved. Sapegno's own contribution to the anti-Croce campaign was however distinctly cultural and acquired an exemplary generational value because of its precise biographical references. Published in *Rinascita* in August 1945, Sapegno's "Marxismo, cultura, poesia" triggered a polemic that would rebound on the pages of *Mercurio* and

Belfagor. Sapegno took on the task of seeing 'in what terms the historical consideration of cultural and aesthetic facts takes shape for a Marxist and in general for the modern man' (Sapegno 1945, 183). By condemning Croce's approach to history as ahistorical, and by declaring Marxism to be 'integral historicism', Sapegno outlined the agenda of the Marxist literary historian who, advancing in the opposite direction from the one indicated by Crocean aesthetics, should link works of art to their historical context and to the agents that contributed to artistic production.

However, despite the well-argued refutation of Croce's aesthetics and of the limits of his critical method, the polemical value of Sapegno's articles did not reside in the concurrent and equally cogent positive evaluation of the application of historical materialism to the realm of cultural production. It lay instead in the biographical closing paragraph to the piece, where Sapegno justified his adherence to Marxist literary criticism not as a result of an 'ex-post adaptation of my activity of literary historian to my Marxist faith, but rather of a long and tormented reflection on the insufficiencies and unsatisfied exigencies revealed through the application of the Crocean method, on which – like all the men of my generation – I had formed myself' (Sapegno 1945, 184). Indeed, it would be precisely this concomitance of a personal conversion, the realisation of the theoretical failure of Crocean aesthetics, and a veiled hope for a generational awakening that would attract Luigi Russo's piqued and sarcastic riposte, published first in *Mercurio* in 1945 and then in the "Noterelle e schermaglie" section of the first issue of *Belfagor* (Russo 1946b). An extraordinary polemical essay, fuelled by personal acrimony and professional rivalry, Russo's piece exploited the value of paradox to great effect, by establishing an equivalence between the aims of Crocean historicism and the aims of historical materialism. Russo's sarcastic piece hinted that Sapegno had adhered to Fascist groups and had

praised the cultural collaboration with Nazism. This infamous reference led to an incendiary diatribe that reverberated across the cultural field. Lucio Lombardo Radice, Pietro Ingrao, Mario Alicata and Carlo Salinari, who had either served as assistants to Sapegno (Alicata and Salinari) or had developed a mentoring relationship during the last years of the Fascist regime (Ingrao and Lombardo Radice) published a letter of protest in *Mercurio*, which was republished with a reply by Russo (1946c) in *Belfagor*. The letter defended Sapegno's anti-fascist credentials, while alluding to Russo's lack of engagement with the Resistance during the Nazi occupation.

The unceremonious, petty, and in some instances outright sordid tones of this quarrel, however unpalatable, were symptomatic of a clash between different interpretations of Croce's influence, as well as a demonstration of personal uneasiness in dealing with contradictions arising out of past affiliations and present conversions. Sapegno's contribution to the anti-Croce polemic developed a critical reflection on the Crocean method and Marxist literary historiography and an interest in generational conversions from idealism to Marxism. In this respect, Sapegno's "L'insegnamento di Piero Gobetti" is emblematic of the author's desire to reflect on the philosophical and political conditions that led several of his generation to turn their backs on Croce after the fall of Fascism. Sapegno identified themes that showed Gobetti's revolutionary and agonistic liberalism as intrinsically at odds with Croce's liberalism. In this respect, Gobetti's original reading of the limitations of Croce's negation of the revolutionary agency of the working class comes most vividly to the fore when Sapegno's analysis drew parallels between Gobetti's insightful criticism and the contemporaneous political circumstances in which the Liberal Party,

under Croce's presidency, was espousing the most reactionary stances against instances of widening participation in the political process (See Sapegno 1946, 161).

The Youth Question

The influx of anti-fascist militants with a non-Marxist *cursus honorum* into the Communist Party posed with urgency the question of political pedagogy, as duly noted by Togliatti in *Rinascita*'s programme and by Lucio Lombardo Radice in his "Comunismo e cultura":

The great majority of young Italian communist intellectuals do not come from Marxism; even those who profess themselves Marxist were yesterday Crocean or absolute idealists […], liberals or liberal-socialists in politics. These are not isolated cases but a real movement towards Marxism from other positions that is affecting increasingly wider areas of Italian culture (Lombardo-Radice 1945, 217)

In 1945, a debate ensued in the pages of *Rinascita*, which contributed to a wider discursive context in which the youth question and intellectual leadership were perceived as inextricably linked. Celeste Negarville's "Una generazione influenzata dal fascismo" focussed on the undercover propaganda activities of those young intellectuals who had infiltrated the 'Fascist mass organization, utilizing Trojan horse tactics' (Negarville 1945, 23). Crucially, Negarville also wrote of the political opposition that emerged in the Littoriali della cultura 'where antifascism was fully manifest, notwithstanding the vigilance of those professors aligned with fascism' (ibid., 23-24). This statement from the *L'Unità* editor not only confirmed a broadly

endorsed widening access policy, but also a realistic reconsideration of the complex factors shaping intellectual identity in this crucial period of Italian history. Furthermore, while ready to exalt the tradition of organized dissent that stretched back to the dark years of the Regime, with the aim of showing the associative and affective power of Communist propaganda, Negarville was equally keen to highlight the need to awaken from their indifference those young people who regarded their new experience of democratic life with scepticism and distance.

'Giovinezza' had indeed been a key word for Fascist political discourse, and the Fascist regime had invested considerable resources in the creation of structures, institutions, and indoctrination programmes aimed at the young (Koon 2012). The historical memory of this organized programme of intellectual influence produced cautious attempts, especially in the Liberal bloc, to approach the youth question and the impact of Fascist education (La Rovere 2008, 29-133). In this respect, Guido De Ruggiero's "I giovani"– originally published in *Nuova Europa* in 1944 (now in Ruggiero 1994, 53-54) – can be considered emblematic of the Liberal-Socialist political debate. Weary of the exaltation of '"giovanilità" as a self-standing value', De Ruggiero was keen to establish the effects of the 'fascist mis-education' on the youth but also ready to classify behavioural distinctions amongst the 1920s generation. He proceeded to identify three groups, 'the lost youth', 'the disoriented youth' and the 'minority of egregious youth', which 'albeit restricted, is by far the most steadfast that Italy has ever had' and for which De Ruggiero feared the risk of isolation and segregation from 'the mass of the less worthy and able, whereas their place must be amongst the mass to facilitate its internal struggle and elevation to their heights' (De Ruggiero 1994, 54). Also in De Ruggiero the youth question displayed numerous symmetries with the intellectual question (articulated in his "Questo popolo. Gli

intellettuali" published in *Nuova Europa* in 1 April 1945). Indeed, his systematization of the youth question and the identification of an elite group with potential leadership qualities reflects his analysis of the intellectual field after the fall of the Regime, equally characterised by an elite group that needed to channel the 'the mediated influx of cultural renewal operating in the elites' (De Ruggiero 1994, 61) towards the less equipped strata of the population.

De Ruggiero's systematization both rang true and raised problems for the many young intellectuals who had internalised Croce's interpretation of the intellectual's civic mission in the context of the Fascist discourse of domination but who were also deeply attracted by the Marxist agenda and the cultural politics of the PCI. For these recruits the main problem was how to convert their intellectual habitus invested in processes legitimising distinction and elitist dispositions, and how to put into action the lessons that they were taking from Gramsci's analysis of new intellectual class: how to break free from an inherently elitist model of intellectual leadership? How best to interpret the role of the intellectual within the emancipatory struggle of the working class? How to make high culture relevant to workers and how to communicate the values of working-class culture to a diversified audience? In this sense, the realization of Gramsci's vision depended on an effective programme of cleaning out the Crocean principles that still inhabited the hearts and minds of many young militants who had joined the PCI.

As Lombardo Radice had noted in his "Comunismo e cultura", allegiance to the PCI did not 'require the acceptance of Marxist-Leninist ideology' (Lombardo-Radice 1945, 217), since Marxism was neither a formulaic 'catechism' nor 'anti-historicism', and so adhesion meant neither '*total* refusal of other intellectual experiences, nor a neat break with the past *taken as a whole*' (ibid., 218). This

acknowledgement of the idealistic roots of so many militants led Radice to discuss in greater detail the type of anti-Fascism that idealism had engendered, in order to mobilise further the consciences of the new recruits and show them a different paradigm of political commitment. Radice's "L'anticomunismo liberale" constitutes the most lucid analysis of the function played by Crocean idealism in the reactionary politics seized upon by the Fascist Regime. By drawing attention to and praising the function of 'orientation […] and attraction' (Lombardo-Radice 1946, 237) played by *La critica* for young intellectuals of the period, Radice also clearly highlighted how the concept of liberty heralded by Croce was used by the Regime to give intellectual *gravitas* to the regime's anti-Socialist resolve, while at the same time undermining the efficacy of Liberal anti-Fascism. The Crocean 'moral and cultural' interpretation of antifascism had translated into a purely intellectual stance, a 'static anti-fascism' whose 'weak and uncertain position' led to an ossified statement of allegiance to the 'religion of liberty' which produced neither pragmatic alternatives nor a much-needed 'anti-fascist activation' (238). According to Radice 'Liberals 'prepared themselves' and invited others to do the same: they *did not prepare*, they did not build a new situation themselves' (Lombardo-Radice 1946, 238). This analysis resonated with Russo's "I giovani del venticinquennio fascista (1919-44)", published in the first issue of *Belfagor*, where Russo (1945a) reiterated an interpretation of anti-fascism that coincided with the practice and the defence of high culture.

A lucid portrait of the relationship between "I giovanissimi e la cultura negli ultimi anni del Fascismo" was published by classicist Antonio La Penna (b. 1925), and issued in two instalments in *Società* (1946 and 1947), in a period when this journal was heavily engaged in spreading Gramsci's thought. La Penna's piece displayed many points of contact with Sapegno's own identity narrative, and with

Russo's description of the role played by literary culture as a conduit for mediated criticism of the regime, but it also contained significant differences. La Penna clearly indicated in his reading of Gramsci's works a transformative experience leading to a progressive understanding of Marxism that, for many of his generation, had been mediated by Croce's distorting prism (La Penna 1947: 395, 398-400). The dissolution of idealism therefore, in La Penna's view, was linked to a 'pedagogical' failure on the part of the heralds of Crocean idealism and to the inefficacy of 'ethical intellectualism' propagated by Croce's philosophical system (La Penna 1946, 686). Furthermore, the distinctively literary character of the intellectual experience described by La Penna concealed a number of polemical strands that converged in the reception of idealist culture in a field increasingly colonised by Marxist agents upholding a Gramscian view of intellectual engagement. Following Radice, La Penna (1946, 682) acknowledged the persistence of a Crocean intellectual *habitus* in the sense of 'the substance of our mental formation, nesting in the folds of those who more acutely feel the insufficiency of recent idealist culture' and, contrary to Sapegno, admitted that for many people Marxist political practice was entwined with a still unresolved Crocean literary disposition. This disposition translated into a vision that still assigned a higher role to culture than to politics. La Penna found the embodiment of this impasse in Vittorini's *Politecnico,* and his critique imputed *naivety* to the enthusiastic reception of American literary culture (La Penna 1947, 390-391) and *superficiality* to the incisiveness of vision embodied in Vittorini's short-lived journal. '[T]he generic encyclopaedism, the empty affirmation of renewal without a critical identification of new content' characterising *Politecnico* represented, in his view, both the substance of the culture inherited by the young intellectuals and its limits (ibid, 401-402). La Penna was here deploying the main criticism levelled at

Vittorini by Mario Alicata in his 1946 *Rinascita* article "La corrente *Politecnico*", giving rise to the polemic between Togliatti and Vittorini, which reverberated in the pages of PCI-aligned journals such as *Società*. In this article Alicata criticised *Politecnico* for failing to 'establish a productive contact between our culture and the concrete interests and problems of the Italian popular masses' and to 'build a bridge' between the intellectual class and 'the democratic front' (Alicata 1946). This failure was exemplified in *Politecnico*'s enthusiastic support of American authors, and in his attack on *Politecnico*'s international outlook, Alicata adapted Gramsci's vision for the national role of the intellectual class to cold war cultural politics. Furthermore, Alicata's criticism resonated with Gramsci's analysis of the dangers inherent in the internationalisation of culture explicated in the role played by Croce's cosmopolitism in Southern culture and discussed in *La questione meridionale*.

But was Alicata right? Like many of his generation, Vittorini bowed farewell to Croce's philosophical system and to his view of the consolatory function of high culture; but when he engaged in the intellectual struggle to defend *Politecnico*'s programme, his language resounded with the semantics and vocabulary of a typically Crocean defence of culture. In the attempt to formulate a relationship of equality between "Politica e cultura", published in *Politecnico* in July-August 1946, Vittorini stated that while culture 'cannot but operate beyond a […] strategy, on the […] plane of history,' in its search for 'truth' it cannot be limited by politics, because politics would 'attempt to contain it within the truth already revealed' (Vittorini 2008, 305). This synthesising vision of politics and culture, however, revealed the impossibility of a perfectly balanced fusion between them. In "Lettera a Togliatti" published in the January-March 1947 issue of *Politecnico*, Vittorini denied that 'politics and culture are perfectly distinct' but maintained that the two spheres

regulated two distinct areas of action, with their own defining 'dynamism'. Vittorini ultimately acknowledged that to advocate culture as ancillary to politics would be tantamount to creating 'a void in history' (Vittorini 2008, 398-399). While it was Marxism that showed Vittorini the need for an anti-bourgeois literary practice, and while in his "Lettera" he had referred to Croce's influence as the embodiment of 'anti-culture', it was nevertheless Crocean semantics and habitus that helped codify the language he used to defend the distinction between politics and culture. In this debate, as Luigi Russo polemically noted in his 1947 "Politica e cultura" (now in Russo 1949, 298-306), not only did Vittorini interpret the role of the "Crocean" agent, interested in the free circulation of ideas, but the *Rinascita* group, in endorsing a regimented organization of culture, seemed to hold a view not dissimilar from the cultural politics promoted by Giovanni Gentile, Croce's former pupil, first high-profile dissenter, and the foremost Fascist intellectual.

Despite a deeply felt antagonism towards Croce's cultural politics that stretched back to his collaboration on Fascist journals such as *Primato* and *La Ruota*, Alicata acknowledged Croce's anti-Fascist credentials and his role in the foundation of a culture that disdained metaphysical explanations and pursued the establishment of a civic religion as a precondition for the completion of the national project.[11] While profoundly dissenting over the aims, modalities, and strategies of such a project, Alicata's respect for Croce's tireless intellectual action was tangible in the pieces he wrote after Croce's death in 1952. Amongst the contributions dedicated to the philosopher in the last *Rinascita* 1952 issue, Alicata's "Benedetto Croce e il Mezzogiorno" (now in Alicata 1968, 301-304) distinguished itself for moving beyond Gramsci's analysis of Croce's cultural function, for displaying admiration for Croce's organizational role in the Southern intellectual bloc, and

expressed the wish that the 'immense inheritance' embodied in Croce's scholarship focusing on the history of Naples and Southern Italy should lead to further research in connected disciplinary fields. In his 1950 *Rinascita* essay "La cultura del mezzogiorno", Alicata had already noted the crumbling influence of what he called the Crocean 'monarchy' and had despaired at the realisation that despite very small and encouraging changes in the post-war intellectual landscape of Southern Italy, Croce still appeared to be the most authoritative voice in an otherwise silent desert. Nothing much had changed in the subsequent two years, Alicata noted: Croce's erudition and hegemony was so extraordinary it was difficult to find or name an obvious heir, concluding with the wish that Croce's Marxist adversaries could act as custodians of the 'lay and antifascist message that Croce had left to Neapolitan and Southern intellectuals' (Alicata 1968, 304). This wish could be considered surprising, if not paradoxical, only if it were extrapolated from a cultural context where, as demonstrated by the analysis so far carried out, appropriation of Crocean tropes, the polemical dismantlement of Croce's role during Fascism, and the absorption of Crocean intellectuals had been the main strategies carried out by the PCI to infiltrate and then dominate the post-war intellectual field.

Conclusions

The various narratives so far examined can be grouped in two interrelated camps that cut across generations: one that boasted an anti-Croce stance stemming from a deep-seated ideological opposition to bourgeois culture and one characterised instead by a critical distance spurred by Croce's inability to produce a credible solution to the shortfalls of the Liberal state and idealist culture, both of which were

seen as partly responsible for the rise of Fascism. The propaganda value of the narratives developed by the first camp (Togliatti, Platone, Alicata) was underpinned by a moral project deeply connected to the strategically sensitive launch of Gramsci's work in the intellectual field. The public dimension of the accounts produced by young and older Crocean intellectuals (Lombardo Radice, Sapegno, La Penna) often straddled personal concerns and political predicaments, and emphasised conversion as a turning point, both historically necessary and personally liberating. Furthermore, these spokesmen powerfully advocated open dialogue as a resource for capturing intellectual forces, for ultimately realising a cultural appropriation and a re-functionalisation of idealist dispositions within a newly found Marxist framework. The diffusion of these narratives in cultural outlets either officially linked or closely related to the PCI such as *Rinascita* and *Società* supported the strategy of cultural pluralism that the PCI was keen to project in the intellectual field, at that point in Italy's history (1944-1947). But this phase, where the accommodation of young or prestigious Crocean intellectuals would not only be tolerated but actively facilitated, was quickly coming to an end. As Togliatti testified in his 1952 "Intervento alla Commissione culturale nazionale" (Togliatti 1974, 195-196), this period of dynamic and often contradictory pluralism was a necessary phase for Marxist expansion in the intellectual field. The political expediency of the duplicity adopted in the intellectual field, aptly summarised by Fortini's definition of Togliatti's charismatic role in this strategy as "half Croce and half Stalin" (quoted in Ajello 1979, 473), had managed to attract huge numbers of intellectuals across the political spectrum, including high-profile former Crocean agents such as Luigi Russo (who formally adhered to the PCI in 1948 as he considered this party the only bastion against the advance of clericalism in the political field). However, this strategy also sparked

equally high-profile clashes such as the one involving Elio Vittorini (who fought to preserve an autonomous yet democratic role for culture in an increasingly polarised intellectual field).

The *rappel à l'ordre* that followed, imposed by the political polarization induced by the Cold War, required of the new recruits an adjustment to the party cadre habitus; an endorsement of Marxist values could no longer be postponed. The 1956-1957 crisis that hit the PCI and changed its intellectual composition, sparked off by the Hungarian uprising and accelerated by Togliatti's defence of the Soviet Union, would ultimately reveal how difficult this structural adjustment had been for many of those intellectuals who entered the PCI folds from the Crocean diaspora.[12]

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[1] The various phases of this strategic cultural operation are detailed in Daniele (2005).
[2] For the role played by Einaudi in the diffusion of Gramsci's work see Chiarotto (2011, 64-76).
[3] For this see Chiarotto (2011, 99-110) and Liguori (1991).
[4] For a contextualisation of *Aretusa* see Cavalluzzi (2004) and La Penna (2016).

[5] For an analysis of the discourse revolving around Croce's illness metaphor see Ward (1996, 70-85) and Leavitt (2016).
[6] For *La critica* see Garin (1959, 187-240). For a systematization of Croce's cultural politics see Garin (1987, 47-69) and Bellamy (2014, 93-111).
[7] For an analysis of Russo's role and the cultural function played by *Belfagor* in the post-war period see Garin (1963, 175-207).
[8] See Russo (1955, 282-361) for the discussion of role played by Gramsci in his progressive distance from Croce.
[9] Vacca (1976, 37-42) provides a wide-ranging and insightful analysis of this key Togliatti contribution.
[10] The review was published in *Quaderni della Critica* 3 (8) 1947, for the ensuing polemic see Chiarotto (2011, 47-63). For a discussion of Gramsci's debts towards Croce see Bellamy (2001).
[11] For an overview of Alicata's activities during the regime see Serri (2005: 151-177).
[12] The PCI reaction to the Hungarian uprising generated a huge controversy. Carlo Muscetta, at the time at helm of *Società* with Gastone Manacorda, organized a written response to Togliatti which gathered huge support both within the party and amongst PCI sympathisers. Amongst the signatories of the so-called "Manifesto dei 101" one finds former Crocean intellectuals and collaborators of the early hour to *Rinascita* such as Natalino Sapegno, legal scholar Vezio Crisafulli, and philosopher Alberto Caracciolo. For the full text of the Manifesto see Ajello (1979: 536-538).