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Recent Crocean Encounters Outside Italy

Benedetto Croce was central to the distinctive Italian idealist-historicist tradition, which was once well known abroad, though it has become much less prominent in recent decades. Questions about its ongoing relevance outside Italy have arisen periodically, but reference to Croce remains infrequent. Still, several recent instances of English-language discussion prove instructive. They involve a noted Israeli scholar, Zeev Sternhell, whose work has been translated from the French original, and two younger Dutch scholars, Herman Paul and Rik Peters, writing in English. So there is a multi-national dimension even to these recent works in English. At issue are difficult questions concerning the bases and enduring import of the tradition centering around Croce and Giovanni Gentile, his one-time collaborator, then rival and antagonist. In *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition* (2010), Sternhell bitterly criticizes Croce for questioning Enlightenment ideals.¹ Though Sternhell's treatment may strike Croceans as too tendentious to merit consideration, this is a major work, with testimonials from leading scholars, published in 532 pages by a leading university press. So its handling of Croce must be taken seriously.²

An important public intellectual in Israel, Sternhell is widely considered an expert on the intellectual antecedents of fascism. His work has always been marked by moral fervor and a conviction that ideas matter profoundly. And his hostility to fascism has long been palpable. In *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, first published in French in 1989, he brought his longstanding interest in proto-fascist French ideas to bear on the

¹ Z. STERNHELL, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT 2010.

² I reviewed the book in «The American Historical Review», Dec (2010), pp. 1519-1521, but I lacked the space to consider its treatment of Croce.

emergence of fascism in Italy.³ And his work has been valued highly by at least some Italian scholars.⁴

Croce was among Sternhell's targets in that earlier work, and I criticized Sternhell's treatment in an article published in 2000.⁵ But the stakes deepen as Croce again figures prominently in *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, where Sternhell adopts a broader chronological and national compass. If anything, in fact, he is even more censorious as he portrays a Manichean struggle between the healthy Enlightenment tradition and those who have threatened it.⁶ Starting with Herder, Vico, and Burke, the anti-Enlightenment tradition came to encompass such putative successors as Taine, Renan, Barrès, Maurras, Sorel, Meinecke, and Spengler. And for Sternhell, Croce was central among them.⁷

In Sternhell's portrayal, Croce had an abiding dislike of democracy.⁸ Indeed, Croce denied both the autonomy of the individual and the capacity of reason to mold social life.⁹ Whereas the Enlightenment deemed human beings the masters of their own destinies, Croce was prominent among those who minimized the role of human will through appeals to "Providence" or some higher destiny.¹⁰ And as a historicist, he joined those from Herder to Meinecke who fostered relativism while rejecting natural law, universalism, and the unity of the human race.¹¹ Indeed, argues Sternhell, both before and after the First World War, Croce was ferociously hostile to all forms of cosmopolitanism.¹²

While recognizing Croce's eventual anti-fascism, Sternhell insists that Croce's contributions to Mussolini's rise to power are too often obscured. Eager to ditch liberal Italy, Croce applauded the rise of fascism. The

³ Z. STERNHELL, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1994.

⁴ See, for example, F. GERMINARIO (ed.), *Destra, sinistra, fascismo: Omaggio a Zeev Sternhell*, Grafo, Brescia 2005.

⁵ D.D. ROBERTS, *How Not to Think about Fascism and Ideology, Intellectual Antecedents and Historical Meaning*, now in my book of selected essays, *Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2007, pp. 197-200.

⁶ See Z. S STERNHELL, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, cit., p. 11, for an example of his tendency toward simplistic, Manichean bifurcation.

⁷ Ivi, pp. 20, 205, 336.

⁸ Ivi, pp. 223, 250; 262, 336, 342-43.

⁹ Ivi, pp. 183, 207.

¹⁰ Ivi, pp. 16, 45, 105, 119-120, 124, 141, 152, 154, 163, 183, 187, 422.

¹¹ Ivi, pp. 16, 105, 279, 368.

¹² Ivi, p. 366.

argument is not merely that Croce, like so many others, failed to understand fascism early on. Sternhell insists that no one understood the content and function of fascism better than Croce, who welcomed it essentially as an anti-democratic *ricorso*.¹³

The notion that Croce was hostile to the Enlightenment has certainly been heard before, but Sternhell raises new questions about the implications of Croce's thinking while also forcing us to ponder matters of intellectual responsibility. What orientation to the Enlightenment tradition is appropriate and responsible? However, an evaluation of Sternhell's case suggests not only that it is a travesty of Croce, but that it is precisely Sternhell's rigidity and schematism that merit condemnation.

In a noted, highly nuanced study published in 1970, Giralomo Cotroneo charged that much stereotype and cliché had come to surround portrayals of Croce as an anti-Enlightenment thinker. On the one hand, he stressed Croce's positive overall evaluation of Enlightenment, especially its practical contributions, stemming from a demand for social renewal.¹⁴ On the other hand, however, Cotroneo recognized a certain ambivalence in Croce's evaluation, in light of his well known criticism of certain Enlightenment themes and tendencies—the reliance on “natural law”, for example.¹⁵ Indispensable though the Enlightenment had been, it had left much to be developed, some of which was accomplished with the growth of liberalism and philosophical idealism during the nineteenth century.¹⁶

For Croce, then, the Enlightenment was not to be rejected *in toto*, but neither was it to be fetishized or reified. Sternhell, however, refers to «the entire intellectual infrastructure on which liberalism and democracy are based», as if these had been given for all time.¹⁷ He is surely right to portray rationalism, universalism, and individualism as abiding pillars of the Enlightenment tradition, but each opens a new universe of questions, and practice has revealed tensions among them. Rather than simply embrace such themes, as if they meshed seamlessly, Croce was willing to reflect critically, to make distinctions, and to learn from experience as the mainstream modern strand developed from the Enlightenment. On that

¹³ Ivi, pp. 24, 205, 336, 341, 343.

¹⁴ G. COTRONEO, *Croce e l'illuminismo*, Giannini, Napoli 1970, pp. xii-xiii, 12, 21-22, 34-35.

¹⁵ Ivi, pp. 20, 29, 55-56, 58.

¹⁶ Ivi, pp. 34-35.

¹⁷ Z. STERNHELL, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, cit., p. 292.

basis, he sought, for example, to show more convincingly how reason interfaces with both ethical response and historical understanding. Such questioning and adjustment, however, is precisely what Sternhell will not allow. His rigid, uncritical embrace of the Enlightenment turns its themes into mere myths and slogans, precisely what Croce found most objectionable.

Apparently assuming that Croce, as an anti-Enlightenment thinker, can simply be rejected whole, Sternhell betrays an embarrassing ignorance of Croce's intellectual framework. At one point referring to Croce as a Catholic, he seriously misrepresents Croce on the place of religion.¹⁸ He seems to have no sense of the anti-positivist framework from within which Croce engaged Vico, or even that Croce's embrace was selective—and on what basis.¹⁹ In the same way, Sternhell has no sense of the crucial respect in which Crocean historicism transcended the German variety.²⁰

In charging Croce both with anti-individualism and with denying the unity of the human race, Sternhell proves unable to grasp how Croce conceived the relationship between individuality and universality.²¹ Indeed, no one was more convinced than Croce of the unity of human race. Thus his use of «the spirit», in the singular to characterize the subject or agent of history. We individuals all collaborate in the endless coming to be of some particular world. And Croce showed how this mode of universality-totality dissolves what have seemed the troublingly relativistic implications of historicism.²²

At the same time Croce was among the most cosmopolitan of modern intellectuals, as was clear especially during the First World War, when his explicit refusal to impute cultural meaning to the war, in dramatic contrast with the chauvinism of others, made him especially controversial. Croce warned against the inflated claims and myth-making to which even his collaborator Gentile was seemingly becoming prone.²³

Others before Sternhell have sought to tar Croce with at least indirect responsibility for fascism. And few deny that Croce made some poor

¹⁸ Ivi, pp. 338, 435.

¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 338-39.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 342.

²¹ Ivi, pp. 207, 223, 250.

²² B. CROCE, *Etica e politica*, Laterza, Bari 1967, p. 350.

²³ On Croce's wartime stance and his divergence from Gentile, see D.D. ROBERTS, *Croce and Beyond: Italian Intellectuals and the First World War*, «International History Review», 3 (1981) 2, pp. 201-35.

political decisions even through the Matteotti crisis of 1924. But Sternhell's way of spinning Croce's stance *vis-à-vis* fascism, and its place in Croce's intellectual trajectory, grotesquely misrepresents Croce's position.²⁴ Because Croce had dared to question aspects of the Enlightenment tradition, Sternhell implies, his hesitations during the transition to the Fascist regime could only have meant active endorsement, in full knowledge of what fascism portended. But if that were the case, why did Croce change his mind and become a bitter foe of the regime? If he was so eager to «ditch liberal Italy», why did he publish *A History of Italy*, his spirited defense of the liberal regime, in 1928? And if he was so uniformly hostile to the Enlightenment tradition, why did he go on, in 1932, to publish *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, lauding the whole liberal turn, while also lamenting the evident erosion of liberal culture?

Continuing the effort of rethinking in light of experience, Croce, in the wake of fascism, sought to show how liberalism is more firmly grounded via historicism than natural law or individual rights. And whereas he surely agreed that men are their own masters, so did Gentile, as a fascist totalitarian. What matters is how we exercise our mastery, and the limits Croce ended up positing are especially salutary in light of our historical experience. Croce does not merit the last word, but his mode of ongoing rethinking, rather than digging in our heels and denigrating those who question, is precisely what we need as we continue.

Another major figure who has seemed hostile to Croce, though for more subtle and plausible reasons, is the noted American theorist of history Hayden White, who treated Croce most influentially in *Metahistory* (1973), the key English-language work in the philosophy of history of the past half century. It was published in Italian translation as *Retorica e storia* in 1978.²⁵ Although some of the issues are hardly new, the basis and implications of White's treatment of Croce have recently prompted some fresh discussion.

The matter is of particular interest because White began as a Croce partisan, offering two of the most insightful essays on Croce published in

²⁴ Z. STERNHELL, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, cit., pp. 341-42.

²⁵ H. WHITE, *Retorica e storia*, 2 vols. Guida, Naples 1978. Some have charged that the poor quality of the translation impeded White's influence in Italy, but certainly White had some impact. See, for example, R. DAMI, *I troci della storia: La narrazione nella teoria della storiografia di Hayden White*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 1994.

English to that point. The first was an introduction to his own translation of Carlo Antoni's *Dallo storicismo alla sociologia* (1940), explaining the book's Crocean background.²⁶ White went on to proclaim «The Abiding Relevance of Croce's Idea of History» in an article of that title in 1963.²⁷ But from there he gradually moved to a particular way of dismissing Croce, in *Metahistory*, as the ironic culmination of nineteenth-century realism and, in the last analysis, as a time-bound bourgeois ideological spokesman. Croce putatively left the historian as a passive observer, cut off from using historical understanding to help build the future.²⁸

In three different publications, beginning in 1987, I charged White with misconstruing Croce, but my effort had little impact.²⁹ Indeed, most students of White have said little about his encounter with Croce or his change of tune. But Herman Paul, in recently offering a full intellectual biography of White, could not sidestep the encounter. Indeed, he takes it as central and seeks to pinpoint the reasons for White's change of heart.

Unfortunately, however, Paul simply takes the reasons White himself gave at face value, with no critical analysis. Croce's "rhetorical liberalism" and "armchair humanism" had been inadequate to the challenges of fascism in Italy.³⁰ But the key was that White came to view Croce as the ironic culmination of nineteenth-century realism.³¹ Although Paul cited some of what I had said about White's earlier positive embrace of Croce, he neglects what I say in the same article about misrepresentation.³² So his

²⁶ C. ANTONI, *From History to Sociology: The Transition in German Historical Thinking*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1959.

²⁷ *The Abiding Relevance of Croce's Idea of History*, now in H. WHITE, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957-2007*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2010, pp. 50-67.

²⁸ H. WHITE, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1973, pp. 375-425.

²⁹ D.D. ROBERTS, *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1987, especially pp. 345-49, 411 (n. 48); D.D. ROBERTS, *Nothing but History*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1995, pp. 254-262; D.D. ROBERTS, *The Stakes of Misreading: Hayden White, Carlo Ginzburg, and the Crocean Legacy* (2002), now in D.D. ROBERTS, *Historicism and Fascism*, cit., pp. 237-264.

³⁰ H. PAUL, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination*, Polity Press, Cambridge UK 2011, pp. 36, 47, 124. For my review, see D.D. Roberts, *Possibilities in 'A Thoroughly Historical World': Missing Hayden's White's Missed Connections*, «History and Theory», 52 (2013) 3, pp. 265-77.

³¹ H. PAUL, *Hayden White*, cit., pp. 36, 41, 55, 63, 68.

³² Ivi, p. 32.

account could only reinforce the ongoing tendency to neglect or even actively to denigrate Croce. There is surely room for a more critical appraisal.

Invited to contribute to a special issue of *Rethinking History* to commemorate *Metahistory's* fortieth anniversary, I sought, in a recently published article, to address White's encounter with Croce more systematically than I had before.³³ The point, I decided, was not simply to defend Croce but to show that White was seeking an alternative to Croce from within much the same post-positivist, post-realist, or even post-modern framework. Each thinker saw the scope for a more resonant historical strand, informed by ethical concerns, and on that basis each found historiography to require a more overt presentism and constructivism.

White, however, opted for a “sublime”, radical orientation, having some kinship with Nietzsche's, whereas Croce had sought to make the cultural transition as safe as possible, specifying the basis for pluralism, humility, and tolerance, even as he also sought to show why these need not breed acquiescence and passivity. White had plausible reasons to dissent from Croce, but by delimiting Croce as a bourgeois ideological spokesman, rather than seriously considering the bases of his more moderate alternative, White was restricting the terms of post-realist debate. To have done greater justice to Croce's position, and then to have rejected aspects of it, would surely have strengthened White's own case.

But in the present context, we can better indicate the essentials of Croce's thinking in light of Rik Peters's critique of my efforts to show Croce's abiding relevance. In 2010, in a review article on my collection of essays, *Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy*, Peters focused especially on my way of treating Croce and Gentile in tandem.³⁴ Although he was appreciative of my work, he raised objections and claimed to posit alternatives. Because he is an able and fair-minded scholar who has studied the Italian tradition in depth, response seems potentially fruitful.

Peters agrees with my longstanding contention that the Italian tradition can contribute significantly to the ongoing quest for a “moderate” cultural framework within the modern secular world. And he and I understand “moderate” in comparable terms, as essentially two-sided. On the one

³³ D.D. ROBERTS, *Rethinking Hayden White's Treatment of Croce*, «Rethinking History» 17 (2013) 4, forthcoming.

³⁴ R. PETERS, *Italian Legacies*, «History and Theory», 49 (2010) 1, pp. 115-129.

hand, it entails learning from our experience with fascism and totalitarianism as we move beyond them. In that light, he and I agree that the bases, stakes, and symptomatic importance of the Croce-Gentile political split have not been fully grasped, partly because it has all seemed obvious in light of wider triumphalist tendencies. But we also agree that the Italian tradition, with its framework of radical immanence, can help us navigate the wider cultural turn summed up, for better or worse, as post-modernism. In this context, moderate means eschewing an array of cultural extremes that open from the erosion of metaphysical foundations, from the move beyond “realism” in historiography, from the acceptance of something like radical immanence overall.

But whereas I feature the ongoing relevance of Croce, Peters insists that a moderate cultural framework can more readily be developed on the basis of the non-Crocean, actualist side of the Italian tradition. Thus his complaints that in discussing the unfinished agenda of postmodernism, I focus on Croce’s mundane historicism and neglect the Gentilian current.³⁵ To be sure, Peters ends up repudiating Gentile’s extreme, totalitarian position, though apparently on grounds other than Croce’s.³⁶ But he finds promise in a more mundane version of actualism. I certainly agree that the quest for the moderate strand must be ecumenical; I have featured Croce as only one contributor. But I do not agree with Peters’s reading of Croce and Gentile, and I believe it instructive to see where he goes wrong.

The first question is how to understand Croce and Gentile’s political divergence in light of their philosophical differences. In contrast with Gennaro Sasso, especially, Peters and I seem to agree that Gentile’s political choice reflected a political vision that followed from his philosophy – that it was not merely contingent, based, as Sasso claims, on a tendentious, fanciful reading of Italian history.³⁷ So where is it that Peters and I disagree about Croce and Gentile? At some points he charges that I underplay their formal philosophies, and the differences on that level, as I

³⁵ Ivi, p. 118. See also p. 124.

³⁶ Ivi, pp. 126, 128.

³⁷ G. SASSO, *Le due Italie di Giovanni Gentile*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1998. I dispute Sasso’s interpretation in an article first published in 2002, now in D.D. ROBERTS, *Historicism and Fascism*, cit., pp. 143-172. For Peters’s implicit agreement, see R. PETERS, *Italian Legacies*, cit., p. 124. In D.D. ROBERTS, *The Totalitarian Experiment in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Routledge, London-New York 2006, I seek more fully to connect Gentile’s fascism to his philosophy, still partly with reference to his divergence from Croce. See especially pp. 130-142, 184-86, 299-306.

focus on the wider cultural programs of each.³⁸ But I argue explicitly in *Historicism and Fascism* that the philosophical differences, which famously became public in 1913, and which revolved around rarefied matters of unification and distinction, foreshadowed the subsequent political divergence.³⁹ Peters and I differ not over the import of formal philosophy but over how to understand the implications of this particular philosophical difference – or, more precisely, over how the differences over distinction and unity helped produce the political split.

We agree on the defining postulates of the distinctive Italian idealist-historicist tradition – most basically the common framework of «absolute immanentism».⁴⁰ In that light we also agree that, as Peters puts it, the thinking of both Croce and Gentile rested «on the same absolute presupposition that reality is nothing but history».⁴¹ But the nub of our difference follows from there, over the senses in which Croce and Gentile took reality to be history. In the last analysis, Peters fails to do justice to the common frame of radical immanence and ends up overplaying certain differences. His criteria prove too conventional, and thus inadequate to grasp the real basis, and thus the stakes, of the divergence.

As Peters sees it, the different ways of understanding reality as history were bound up with different ways of understanding the role of philosophy. For Croce, the main task of philosophy is to establish the categories by which we can think about history; philosophy is in the first place the «methodology of history». For Gentile «reality is history» meant that philosophy must reveal «historical experience»; it must show how we belong to history by making it. In his view, philosophy is not simply the «methodology» of history, but a way of life. In contrast to Roberts's view, therefore, it is Gentile's position, and not Croce's, that must be characterized as radical historicism.⁴²

But “history” is surely a way of life for Croce as well; we need only recall what he intended with his two-sided emphasis on «history as thought and action». For Croce, too, we are to understand how we belong to history by making it, how it is that human being and the world as historical are two sides of the same coin. That was the basis of his overall cultural

³⁸ R. PETERS, *Italian Legacies*, cit., p. 118.

³⁹ See especially D.D. ROBERTS, *Historicism and Fascism*, cit., pp. 120-24, 252-55.

⁴⁰ R. PETERS, *Italian Legacies*, cit., p. 119.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 121.

⁴² *Ibid.*

framework, or “philosophy” writ large, and it cannot be reduced to the methodology of history, whatever he may have seemed to suggest on occasion. On the bases of these criteria, there is no basis for attributing radical historicism to Gentile and not to Croce.

Peters properly features Croce's emphasis on, as Peters puts it, «the distinction between thought and action: to think is to aim at truth, not at the good, and even if the historian begins from contemporary problems, his historical judgment should never be affected by practical concerns».⁴³ Croce found Gentile guilty of precisely the sort of mystical mishmash that follows from blurring such distinctions. But even as he warned against this sort of conflation, Croce did not leave thought and action radically separated. Eschewing moralism while still embracing presentism, he insisted that historical understanding is essential to prepare action. And it is precisely the practical stakes of our inquiries that open the way to truth, which happens insofar as, though stimulated by a present moral concern, we do not simply project moral categories a priori. Insofar as some practical purpose takes over, the inquiry will not open to learning and truth—so does not genuinely prepare action.

At the same time, Gentile was not denying distinction and positing a mystical mishmash to the extent Croce claimed. Every bit as much as Croce, he insisted on the need and the scope for truth, in contrast with fantasy or fiction.⁴⁴ For Gentile, too, what one really thinks is what one believes to be true. Neither some ethical imperative nor sheer will can ever make it true. And for Gentile, too, thinking what we genuinely believe to be true helps shape what we do.

Invoking his former mentor, H.S. Harris, Peters charges that I make Gentile too much an individualist and neglect the distinction between the empirical and the transcendental ego in Gentile's conception: when Gentile was talking about the pure act of thought, he was not referring to the thought of individuals, or empirical egos, but to the act of thought of the transcendental ego. Only at the transcendental level, Gentile said, do we find the completely free act of thought, or thought without presuppositions; particular individuals are always caught up in historical circumstances and conditioned by their presuppositions. As H.S. Harris has pointed out, this distinction between the empirical ego and the

⁴³ Ivi, p. 121.

⁴⁴ G. GENTILE, *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, Sansoni, Florence 1975, pp. 247-48, 256-57.

transcendental ego, which Roberts does not take into account, is of crucial importance in understanding Gentile's adherence to fascism.

Seemingly as a corollary, Peters goes on to argue that «from a historicist perspective, Gentile's [...] fascist interpretation of actualism is not a philosophy of becoming».⁴⁵

Even on the place of individuality, Gentile and Croce were closer than Peters lets on; this proximity, too, follows from the common radical immanence. And it is again the radical immanence that Peters seems to be forgetting as he overdoes the import of the distinction between the transcendental and the empirical ego for understanding Gentile's fascism.

From within the framework of radical immanence, we find not merely individual monads but an aggregate, a mode of collectivity and connectivity, and thus a continuing history. For both Gentile and Croce, we all collaborate in the coming to be of some particular world. Still, characterizing whatever "transcends" the individual is devilishly difficult. Croce insisted on the sense in which the only actor or agent – the maker of the world – is ultimately the whole spirit.⁴⁶ But it does not exist hovering "above", apart from individuals.

For Gentile, too, the empirical individual is one finite fount of the human capacity for both ethical response and truth – and one source of the ongoing human response through which the world continues to grow. As for Croce, the individual is, in one sense, only a participant in an overarching historical process, but without those finite individuals, there is nothing transcendent. So it is not as if something transcendent responds through those finite individuals. Precisely because his premise, too, was radical immanence, Gentile was positing transcendence with a difference. The question was the scope for a new mode of collective response.

And this leads us to the basis of Gentile's totalitarian vision for fascism. Certainly Harris's study of Gentile, published in 1960, remains fundamental; at some points, in fact, Harris is more nuanced than Peters implies. Still, even Harris betrays limits, even occasionally seems flat-footed, when treating Gentile's fascism. This is surely not surprising, however, because over the intervening half century, despite continuing fits and starts, we have come better to understand the aspirations – even the

⁴⁵ R. PETERS, *Italian Legacies*, cit., pp. 123-24.

⁴⁶ B. CROCE, *Filosofia e storiografia*, Laterza, Bari 1969, pp. 143-44 (1946); see also pp. 253-55 in the same volume.

totalitarian aspirations – that fueled fascism and the messy dynamic that ensued from them.

The problem is that Peters, and to a lesser extent Harris as well, tend to default to conventional notions of force, coercion, and authoritarianism, taken as contradicting Gentile's spiritual notion, without understanding what was novel and distinctively totalitarian about Gentile's vision. After coming close to suggesting that for Gentile force is itself spiritual and that, because human freedom is ineradicable, tyranny does not matter, Harris recognizes that for Gentile force will only be real insofar as it is freely internalized. Inflicting pain is negative and implicitly proscribed. And Harris appropriately stresses that authoritarian methods leave apathy and cynical indifference, which Gentile regarded as the supreme evils.⁴⁷ During the 1930s, Harris also notes, Gentile protested that too much discipline and religion would make both merely outward and formal. But then Harris appears to backtrack in concluding that, nevertheless, Gentile «does not seem to have recognized that authoritarian methods could never be relied upon to produce anything other than outward conformity».⁴⁸

Although Harris seems implicitly to acknowledge that in principle the individual is the fount of moral creativity, he apparently could conceive Gentile's way of nurturing and focusing that capacity only in terms of coercion and authoritarianism.⁴⁹ He sees what would be necessary as an ongoing process of interaction, education, and persuasion but does not do justice to the sense in which that was precisely what Gentile himself envisioned and demanded.⁵⁰ As Harris recognizes, Gentile understood that authority is justified only if truth is already given – a possibility that Gentile dismissed as intellectualism. But in this instance, too, Harris was not doing justice to the sense in which truth is continually coming to be through a certain mode of interaction, encompassing the nurturing and focusing of human capacities. Nor does he seem to grasp how, for Gentile, the whole package might be drawn forth as the totalitarian ethical state expands its reach and acts. It is crucial that the Fascist state was not to be

⁴⁷ H. S. HARRIS, *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1966, pp. 319-320.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, p. 320.

⁴⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 315-20.

⁵⁰ G. GENTILE, *Origini e dottrina del fascismo*, Libreria del Littorio, Rome 1929, pp. 35-36, 47-48, 52-53.

merely authoritarian but totalitarian and historicist. That is what Peters, like Harris before him, does not quite recognize.

Contrary to Peters's claim, Gentile's fascist actualism is a philosophy of becoming precisely in the sense that the totalitarian ethical state was an ideal direction or regulative principle, which could never be fully realized in some tangible, empirical institution.⁵¹ It would have to be recreated endlessly as history generates new challenges, calling forth new creative ethical responses on the part of individuals.

In other words, the fascist totalitarian state was itself immanent, part of the history being made. Gentile did not remotely conceive that state as the incarnation of the transcendental ego, as Peters comes close to implying. So it is not the case, as Peters also seems to imply, that focus on the transcendental ego leads one to fascism whereas focus on the empirical ego leaves one with liberalism, pluralism, and individualism. None of this is to defend Gentile, but we need to grasp the totalitarian direction on his terms, from within the frame of radical immanence, to see the appeal, the danger, and – most importantly, for our present discussion – the need for the Crocean alternative from within the same framework, to head off or replace Gentile's extreme direction.

But whatever the bases of Gentile's totalitarian vision, what are the implications of Gentile's actual course of action during the Fascist period? In practice Gentile fostered freedom of thought and expression to some extent, though not always as forcefully as he might have. Peters seems to think the degree of ambiguity seals, or at least buttresses, his contention that Gentile's actualism does not entail the individualism I attribute to it. He notes that «though Gentile subscribed to the moral freedom of individuals, and to the possibility of dissent in the state in theory, in practice he most often chose the side of the state, led by the Duce, putting off conscientious objectors as sheer egotists».⁵²

Although this way of mixing the contingencies of practice with the logic of Gentile's position confuses unnecessarily, the example of conscientious objection is well-chosen – and consistent with what I have argued elsewhere about the deepest danger of Gentile's position.⁵³ But it does not undercut my point about individualism. From within Gentile's framework,

⁵¹ Ivi, pp. 43-48, especially pp. 46-48. See also H.S. HARRIS, *Social Philosophy*, cit., pp. 169-70.

⁵² R. PETERS, *Italian Legacies*, cit., p. 124.

⁵³ See especially D.D. ROBERTS, *Totalitarian Experiment*, cit., p. 427.

not just any individual decision could be respected as genuinely ethical. Conscientious objection would entail an unacceptable degree of opting out, of withdrawal from active participation in the totalitarian ethical community. The conscientious objector cannot have been adequately educated. Reprehensible though we may find the notion, it is consistent with Gentile's totalitarianism and the interplay with individual decision it entailed.

Peters's way of summing up the Croce-Gentile split is arresting but ultimately unsatisfying. After having drawn out their philosophical disagreements publicly, he contends, «Croce and Gentile held each other in a clinch; their differences had gone to the extremes, but there was no way out of the conflict, because each position was built on the same absolute presupposition that reality is nothing but history. In the end, only the rise of fascism could break the two apart».⁵⁴ Certainly it took the advent of fascism to make the stakes of the philosophical split clear. With this formulation, however, Peters glosses over the key point that different directions were possible from within the common framework of radical immanence. There is more than one way of showing «how we belong to history by making it».

As Peters would have it, Gentile's adherence to fascism was due to «a misinterpretation of his own historicist beliefs».⁵⁵ But wherein lay the misinterpretation? In fact Gentile was simply taking the philosophy he shared with Croce in one extreme direction, which he found at once possible and desirable – even essential, in light of the perceived inadequacies of mainstream liberal-positivist modernity. In treating the philosophical split, Peters does not sufficiently feature what Gentile himself saw to be the implications. Responding to Croce's criticisms, Gentile called Croce's attention to «that sense of profound melancholy that pervades your whole contemplation of the world».⁵⁶ A whole cultural framework was at issue, and Gentile found his extreme direction essential to head off the debilitating melancholy that seemed to threaten as we adjust to a purely historical world.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ R. PETERS, *Italian Legacies*, cit., p. 121.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 124.

⁵⁶ G. GENTILE, *Saggi critici*, ser. 2, Vallecchi, Florence 1927, p. 29.

⁵⁷ D.D. ROBERTS, *Historicism and Fascism*, cit., pp. 253-54; D.D. ROBERTS, *Totalitarian Experiment*, cit., pp. 135-36, 302.

Although Peters, in overemphasizing contrast, misconstrued the relationship between thought and action for Croce, it is certainly important that Gentile fused thought and action more rigorously than Croce did; thinking, willing, and acting come together – or can be made to come together – more seamlessly than they do for Croce. However, that required totalitarianism. And not only did the advent of fascism lead Gentile to develop his overtly totalitarian vision, but it prompted Croce to devise his historicist neo-liberalism as an alternative.

The difference between Croce and Gentile is precisely over how we understand ourselves as belonging to history by making it – and thus over how history is made, or could and should be made, through ongoing human response. Because Croce posited limits to the scope for thinking, willing, and acting to come together, he insisted that even as we are collaborating in the ongoing work of the spirit, we cannot simply impose our collective vision on the world. Our collaboration is to some extent blind because we cannot foresee the results of our actions.⁵⁸ Thus the melancholy.

But thus, at the same time, Croce sought to show that we have enough to sustain us as we continue the collaboration. The framework of radical immanence remained, so there was to be no backtracking to Marxism, religion, or the natural law tradition. But we need not be paralyzed by a sense of futility, nor need we settle for some existentialist gesture of self-affirmation. And we need not merely rail against history itself, a significant tendency in the extreme side of postmodernism. We have the wherewithal to proceed in moderation. Thus Croce's deepened emphasis on the enduring weight of what we do, on action as history-making, as he sought the terms of a neo-liberal politics. And thus his accent on the humility, pluralism, and tolerance that surround our individual commitments.⁵⁹

As we noted, Peters considers the actualist strand without the Gentilian excesses more relevant than what I propose based on Croce. And he finds the keys to that more mundane actualism in some parts of Gentile's early educational philosophy, and in the work of other actualists like Adolfo Omodeo, Piero Gobetti, and Guido de Ruggiero, and finally, in some of

⁵⁸ B. CROCE, *Filosofia e storiografia*, cit., pp. 143-44 (1946).

⁵⁹ For examples of Croce's repeated insistence on world-historical modesty, see B. CROCE, *Il carattere della filosofia moderna*, Laterza, Bari 1963, pp. 209-10; and B. CROCE, *Discorsi di varia filosofia*, Laterza, Bari 1959, vol. 1, p. 297.

Collingwood's works, though he never identified himself with actualism». ⁶⁰

Peters faults me for neglecting such thinkers, but the lacunae he laments stem largely from the nature of the volume he was reviewing. ⁶¹ As with many such collections of *pagine sparse*, the essays comprising it are somewhat disparate. Whereas I seek to demonstrate Croce's ongoing relevance in several different cultural contexts, it was never my purpose to treat the whole Italian tradition systematically.

In any case, Peters's preference for a moderate actualism is based on putative contrasts, related to those we have already discussed, between the Crocean and Gentilian conceptions of history: «The irrelevance of history to practice has to be redressed, and on this point actualism [...] has more to offer than “weak totality”, “disclosure of language”, and “interplay between past and process” inspired by Croce». ⁶² To make «historiography truly relevant for practice», Peters feels we must overcome what he finds an excessive distinction, in Croce and many others, between history as past and history as relived, reenacted, reconstructed, or reorganized by the historian. ⁶³ A tendency toward an excessive presentism is indeed one of Croce's limits, but because Peters continues to overemphasize separation in Croce, he does not pinpoint the problem effectively.

Whereas Croce, the argument goes, «still distinguished between history and historiography», both Gentile and Hayden White sought «to go beyond Croce's ironical distance with regard to practice», and this precisely «to make historiography truly relevant for practice». The focus was no longer to be «on history as a representation of the past, but on the past as an experience in the present». ⁶⁴ A number of recent thinkers, some of them partly in White's orbit, have sought to move in the same direction. Although Peters, in opposing Croce's putative separation, initially seems to endorse this vogue of «history as experience», he comes to portray it as yet another misguided quest for the historical sublime. ⁶⁵ And it is in this context that he finds a non-Crocean, mundane actualism, with its

⁶⁰ R. PETERS, *Italian Legacies*, cit., p. 128.

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 118.

⁶² Ivi, p. 128; see also pp. 125-26.

⁶³ Ivi, p. 126.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 129.

particular understanding of the relationship between history and practical life, of special contemporary relevance.⁶⁶

Here too, however, Peters's wider over-emphasis on the difference between Croce and Gentile leads him to misconstrue Croce's thinking about the relationship between history and practical life. Thus he uncritically accepts White's misleading imputation of ironic distance to Croce. The notion that for Croce, history entails «representation of the past» similarly misses the radicalism of Croce's departure from realism and thus from representation: although historiography obviously has a relationship to what happened before, it is not representing something. The question is what it does instead – and how that might serve practice.

Most basically at issue is what we take «relevance for practice» to entail. To understand Croce on the questions at issue, we cannot focus merely on historiography as a delimited mode but must ponder his wider understanding of the human relationship with history, of how we are all caught up in history, of how history is the seemingly endless resultant of all we do. We must grasp what it means to experience action as history-making and why doing so engages our sense of responsibility. From within that framework, the understanding that results from historical inquiry is relevant for practice, precisely in preparing history-making action – a notion central to my critique of White's treatment of Croce.

But though we need no alternative to Croce based on the relevance of historiography for practice, Peters is right that Croce's presentism entails certain excesses, and certain corresponding lacunae, as I have long recognized.⁶⁷ And I made much the same points about these limits, and thus about the need for supplements to overcome them, in several of the essays in *Historicism and Fascism*.⁶⁸ In featuring «historical development», or process to the present, and thus, in any past moment, what lived on to help constitute the next, Croce was arguably turning from other ways we might relate to the past, other ways the past might be relevant to us. Thus, even as he recognized the uses of “anecdotal” history not focused on development, he neglected the scope for more varied roles for historiography.⁶⁹ But in criticizing Croce's presentism while

⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 119.

⁶⁷ For example, D.D. ROBERTS, *Benedetto Croce*, cit., pp. 307-315.

⁶⁸ For example, D.D. ROBERTS, *Historicism and Fascism*, cit., pp. 64, 226, 239.

⁶⁹ B. CROCE, *La Storia come pensiero e come azione*, Laterza, Bari 1966, p. 112; D.D. ROBERTS, *Historicism and Fascism*, cit., pp. 282-83.

simultaneously making the spurious charge of ironical distance, Peters too easily misses what remains valuable in Croce's message.

Still, insofar as Croce's limits demand some sort of supplement, we should indeed consider Collingwood and De Ruggiero, the thinkers Peters features in this context. Dissatisfied with the presentism of both Croce and Gentile, he points out, they developed parallel ways of overcoming the distinction between a dead past and a living present.⁷⁰

In recognizing the need for a supplement, I myself have featured especially Hans-Georg Gadamer, with his accent on dialogue and the scope for recovering lost possibility. He helps us conceive some of what Croce missed, even as he also missed some of what Croce specified.⁷¹ And I would certainly encompass aspects of Collingwood as well,⁷² However, we should recall that Gadamer, even while recognizing a debt to Collingwood, claimed to go well beyond him. Gadamer was congruent with Croce in charging that Collingwood's notion of reenactment was too static, as if the aim were to recover original meaning or subjective intent; it was thus incompatible with the radical historicism Collingwood claimed to profess.⁷³

It is also worth recalling that De Ruggiero, during the pivotal period surrounding the end of the Second World War, betrayed serious limits in charging that Croce's conception had a void at its center – and thus had proven inadequate.⁷⁴ Although the complexities of the political context complicated the relationship, De Ruggiero failed to grasp the most basic reasons for Croce's ongoing relevance. We also note that Girolamo Cotroneo traces the tendency to exaggerate Croce's devaluation of the Enlightenment back to De Ruggiero just after the Second World War.⁷⁵ Whatever De Ruggiero's conception of the relationship between past and present, it surely must be doubted that his overall thinking affords grounds for marginalizing Croce. And more deeply understanding – and absorbing – the basis for the Crocean prescription is, I continue to argue, central to

⁷⁰ R. PETERS, *Italian Legacies*, cit., pp. 126-27.

⁷¹ On Croce and Gadamer see D.D. ROBERTS, *Nothing but History*, cit., pp. 159-78, 172-75, 299-300.

⁷² D.D. ROBERTS, *Nothing but History*, cit., pp. 178-79.

⁷³ H.-G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, Crossroad, New York 1985, pp. 33-34, 149, 468-469; H.-G. GADAMER, *Reason in the Age of Science*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1981, pp. 45-47, 106. See also D.D. ROBERTS, *Nothing but History*, cit., pp. 160, 162-63.

⁷⁴ G. DE RUGGIERO, *Il ritorno alla ragione*, Laterza, Bari 1946, pp. 13-16.

⁷⁵ G. COTRONEO, *Croce e l'illuminismo*, cit., p. 4.

establishing the moderate cultural strand we need.

Abstract

Reference to Croce in English-language discussion remains infrequent, but three recent cases prove instructive. Even as they restore Croce to currency, however, Zeev Sternhell, a major Israeli intellectual, and Herman Paul and Rik Peters, two younger Dutch scholars, end up reinforcing the tendency to denigrate Croce in the English-speaking world. In showing where each goes wrong, the present article seeks to deepen our understanding of Croce's continuing relevance. Placed against Sternhell, Croce shows the value of an ongoing critical assessment of the Enlightenment tradition. Placed against Paul, Croce shows the scope for a presentist and constructivist understanding of historiography that usefully opposes Hayden White's. And in light of Peters, who prefers a mundane actualism, we better grasp what Croce can contribute to the ongoing quest for a moderate political-cultural framework.

Keywords: Croce, Sternhell, Hayden White, Political-Cultural Framework.