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Benedetto Croce and Italian Fascism (review)

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Fabio Fernando Rizi. *Benedetto Croce and Italian Fascism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. Pp. xi + 321.

Fabio Fernando Rizi's rich and detailed study undercuts all sweeping statements about Croce's encounter with Fascism. The Toronto-based scholar has found his way through an extraordinary amount of material in a year-by-year approach. His analysis proceeds chronologically, demanding a good deal of attention from his readers yet allowing them to consider his findings freely and to judge for themselves.

Covering the years 1866 to 1920, the first chapter traces the background and context of Croce's political formation, from the radicalism of his socialist youth (expressed in an unconventional lifestyle that included a 20-year long relationship with feminist Angelina Zampanelli) to a conservative liberalism animated by the intransigent immanentism that made him unavailable to any future *mistica fascista*. Yet Rizi does not hide the incongruities of Croce's early political writings. Some of Croce's early positions, such as his insistence on the authority of the state and on the necessity of force, and his ill-advised association with the Nationalist periodical *Politica*, born out of his friendship with one of its founders, the Neapolitan Francesco Coppola, were recalled and used by Fascist intellectuals and politicians, as previously shown by Armando Carlini in *Saggio sul pensiero filosofico e religioso del fascismo* (1942).

Rizi devotes substantial attention—7 of his 13 chapters—to Croce's political activities during the critical period of 1920 to 1929, one in which the philosopher moved ever closer to Giolitti and substantially revised his own definition of liberalism by abandoning his polemics against the Democrats and downplaying the issue of force. Here, in a historical tour de force, readers are presented with details of Croce's political, cultural, and private life. Rizi remains even-handed in his account of Croce's choices at decisive moments, such as his vote of confidence for Mussolini in 1925, after Matteotti's murder; his decision to join the Liberal Party and the opposition following the violent invasion of his house by Fascist vandals (31 October 1926); his disapproval of the Ethiopian War (accompanied, however, by his problematic compliance with the request to return his senatorial gold medal); and, finally, his vocal opposition to the racial laws. Rizi effectively renders the shadows and nuances of the discrete historical moments. He not only describes the official positions of Croce's fellow intellectuals and politicians of the left and the right (Giustino Fortunato,

Giovanni Giolitti, Giovanni Gentile, Giovanni Amendola, Piero Gobetti, Gaetano Salvemini, and many others), reporting, for instance, how these men voted and the consequences of their actions, but also presents their reasoning, feelings, and doubts about those decisions, as expressed in their private correspondence, conversations, and diaries. Thus, Rizi's readers are vividly confronted with the full difficulty of these choices and are forced to question their own conscience.

In chapters 9 to 11, on the years 1930–40, Rizi reconstructs the thick network of relationships created by Croce in the course of his numerous travels to London, Paris, and throughout Italy. Thanks to his relative freedom of movement, which ended in 1938, Croce maintained and fostered contacts with anti-Fascist leaders such as the Rossellis, Luigi Sturzo, Francesco Fausto Nitti, Leone Ginzburg, Franco Antonicelli, Leonello Venturi, as well as with groups of young anti-Fascist students. The account of Croce's sustained financial help to victims of Fascist persecution (Amendola's sons, Ada Gobetti, Paolo Treves, Mario Vinciguerra), in a direct or indirect way (through the Laterza publishing house), constitutes an impressive testimony to the personal engagement of the Neapolitan philosopher.

Rizi also addresses without hesitation the question concerning Croce's relative freedom. Rizi recognizes the advantages of Croce's position as senator—which Croce never renounced—and Croce's dexterity in never crossing the legal boundaries imposed by the regime, claiming that Croce's bizarre immunity can only be explained ultimately by Mussolini's instrumental approach to culture. To wit, Mussolini concentrated his efforts on controlling the media and organizations that were able to influence larger groups, but he handled individual cultural opponents very differently, preferring to accommodate and show tolerance when it fitted his political needs. Mussolini knew that he could exploit Croce's arguments against radical Nationalist leaders and the Catholic Church. He was also aware that Croce's cultural prestige constituted a national asset. In fact, when Croce's house was vandalized, Mussolini had to undergo the full burden of negative publicity directed at him both at home and abroad.

Chapter 12 documents Croce's role in the conspiracy that led to Mussolini's fall and in the political opposition to the king and the Badoglio government. It also details Croce's negotiations with Italian politicians and Allied figures, and his ability to break a dangerous impasse that might have jeopardized Italy's place among its new allies. The concluding chapter describes the less controversial years of Croce's late political activities.

Rizi draws on materials ranging from records and reports by the Italian police (for example, private letters concerning Croce and his circle preserved at the National Archives in Rome), through Croce's six-volume diary (*Taccuini di lavoro*), to the philosopher's major historical and philosophical books as well as his biographical essays, correspondence, and occasional writings. However, Rizi's choice to organize the copious documents in chronological order and to provide a year-by-year, detailed account of the results of his extensive research poses a significant challenge to his readers. The risk of such a choice is that the most important findings, handled together with less relevant facts, may remain hidden to the reader who is unwilling to filter through the massive material and organize it according to the visibility of the source (a public statement, a private letter, or an entry of the diary) or the political importance of the dominant issue. The many instances in which Croce stood up for political "enemies" of the regime by testifying in court to their innocence are scattered in different chapters among diverse information for the sake of chronology, and thus risk obscurity. Similarly, Croce's courageous article in *Il Mattino* attacking the law passed in May 1925 forbidding "subversive" associations, which allowed the regime to destroy all political opposition, is buried among the numerous events of 1925. A summary of the highlights of each period or year, either at the beginning or at the end of each chapter, would have helped the reader a good deal.

At the same time, it must be stressed that Rizi's overall interpretation becomes clear in his conclusion, which succinctly and convincingly reminds readers of Croce's willingness to take risks on very important occasions. This is not to say that Rizi permits his admiration for Croce to cloud his judgment and interfere with his scholarship. Indeed, he construes a vivid picture of daily life under the Fascist regime.

In his *Cronache di filosofia italiana, 1900–1943* (1955), Eugenio Garin wrote that it was difficult to reconstruct the impact of individual allusions, speeches, and decisions made during the Fascist regime and to render their full weight today: "Words that sounded heroic or treacherous to contemporary ears, expressions of courage or of cowardice, become today flat or merge in a common gray" (12). Rizi has succeeded in returning some true colors to past events and in persuading even the skeptical reader to consider Croce's political efforts under Fascism with increasing respect.