The Spinning Silkworm: Benedetto Croce's *History as the Story of Liberty*

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Abstract

This article explores the abiding relevance of Croce's last book in the philosophy of history, which, due its publication during the war has always been neglected. After discussing the context of Croce's antagonism to the anti-historicist tendencies of his own times, the book is interpreted as theoretical underpinning of Croce's 'ethico-political' histories by which he sought to close the gap between historical thinking and action. This he does on the basis of a sophisticated realist ontology, which is still relevant for contemporary philosophy of history.

Keywords

historicism – Benedetto Croce – practical past – ontology – realism – dialectic of question and answer

1 Anti-historicism

On Wednesday 3 September 1930, the world-famous philosopher, historian, literary critic and anti-fascist dissident Benedetto Croce began his speech for the Seventh International Conference of Philosophy in Oxford with the following clarion call: 'More or less in every people of Europe, in the various spheres of intellectual, artistic, moral and political life, a sort of decadence of historical consciousness, if not an outright anti-historical attitude is being noticed.'¹

1 Benedetto Croce, "Antistoricismo," *La Critica. Rivista di Letteratura, Storia e Filosofia* 28 (1930), 401. Translation by Rik Peters.

Croce went on to distinguish two kinds of anti-historicism. The first 'idolizes a future without a past' and 'adores life for the sake of life, action for the sake of action, and novelty for the sake of novelty'.² In contrast to this futurist form of anti-historicism, Croce pointed to a 'dogmatic' or 'absolutist' form which abhors historical contingency, mobility, diversity, and individuality, which it seeks to overcome by 'pulling itself out of history to find rest in an absolute, stable oneness out of time'.³ In social life this anti-historical dogmatism translates into the suppression of individual initiative by imposing laws and rules, in art it means a return to allegedly classic models and examples, and in intellectual life it results in a suppression of free thought.⁴

Having a common conceptual ground, Croce warned his audience, the two forms of anti-historicism easily shift into each other: anarchists may turn into authoritarians, demagogues into gendarmes.⁵ Moreover, unlike previous forms of anti-historicism which eventually brought new ideas and institutions to the world, the new form had nothing to offer but 'frenetic egoism and harsh command that seems to celebrate an orgy or satanic cult'.⁶ What can we philosophers and historians do now?, Croce asked the audience, which comprised renowned philosophers like A.N. Whitehead, Samuel Alexander, Léon Brunschvicg, Hans Driesch, Ralph Barton Perry, Roy Wood Sellars, Curt John Ducasse, Moritz Schlick, Charles Hartshorne and many others.⁷ Croce answered with a parable: when people no longer care to dress in silk, the silk-worm continues spinning patiently by itself. Therefore, philosophers and historians must defend historicism, for it is history that forms the 'knot between past and future, the warrant for the possibility of novelty, and liberty'.⁸ He concluded with pathos: 'Whoever opens his heart to the historical spirit feels himself no longer alone, but united to the life of the universe, brother and son and comrade of those great minds who, their labour over, still live in the works they have achieved'.⁹

Croce's speech made a deep impression on the audience. As Brand Blanshard, professor of philosophy at Swarthmore College, reported for the *Journal of Philosophy*: 'For learning to become so eloquent was naturally an impressive thing. Whatever one thought about the correctness of it all, one could only

2 Ibid., 401.

3 Ibid., 402.

4 Ibid., 402.

5 Ibid., 403.

6 Ibid., 405.

7 Ibid., 409.

8 Ibid., 409.

9 Ibid., 409.

concede the sweep and power of the reflection that found voice in it, and own gratefully that, whatever Croce may say, the great tradition of philosophizing is not dead.¹⁰

Remarkably, Blanshard's praise reveals that he was not sure what to make of Croce's philosophy. His speech was eloquent but were his ideas philosophically sound? Had not all of his works met with severe criticism from 1909 when they first appeared in English? And had not the renowned British idealist Bernard Bosanquet repeatedly rejected Croce's idealism as an extreme form of subjectivism?¹¹ Moreover, was it not clear that Croce's philosophy a moribund variant of Hegelian idealism which had been buried forever? In the audience, only a few participants from Oxford like J.A. Smith, R.G. Collingwood and some others had always taken Croce's thought seriously. But none of them had considered to make it part of mainstream philosophy, which was increasingly being dominated by realism, logical positivism and analytical philosophy. To adherents of these philosophical currents, Croce's speech was nothing but a cloud of metaphors, idiosyncratic notions, and unverifiable claims. To their ears the appeal to take historicism seriously and to 'open their hearts to the past' sounded like a repetition of the idealism which had so effectively been silenced by realists like Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore before the First World War. But apart from that, how on earth can a philosopher seriously propose historical thinking as a remedy against economic crisis, tyranny, and racism? Unlike science, history cannot provide certain knowledge, let alone guide our actions. Furthermore, history is about the past, not about the present; so how can it be relevant to action at all? Moreover, as Croce himself should know from his own experience, historians and philosophers themselves had greatly contributed to the rise of nationalism, fascism and Nazism. In short: historians could not and should not aim at saving the world.

2 Croce's Life's Work

What most of the attendants at the Conference probably did not know was that Croce had been thinking about these problems from his early youth. After losing his parents and his sister in the earthquake of Casamicciola in 1883,

10 Brand Blanshard, "The Seventh International Congress of Philosophy," *The Journal of Philosophy* 27 (1930), 593.

11 After reviewing several of translations of Croce's major works from 1914, like *The Logic* and *The Philosophy of the Practical*, he wrote a final, highly negative verdict of Croce's philosophy in his last work, *The Meeting of Extremes in Contemporary Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1921).

which he barely survived himself, Croce had taken up 'erudite and antiquarian studies' as a remedy against his post-traumatic depressions.¹² Meanwhile, he had followed some lectures in philosophy at *La Sapienza* in Rome given by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Labriola, but he never took an academic degree. After his return to Naples in 1887, Croce began to study the history of his native city but, not entirely satisfied with the project, he took up a more ambitious plan of writing a great history of the moral and spiritual life of Italy from the Renaissance to the present.¹³ This ambitious project confronted him with so many theoretical questions that he decided to deal with them first, thus getting involved in the philosophy of history. After reading all he could get hold of and focussing on Vico, Marx, Dilthey and the German neo-Kantians, he published a first contribution to the field in 1893 with *La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte*.

As the title of this work indicates, Croce contended that history is a form of art, and not, as the neo-Kantians like Simmel and Rickert held, a form of science. According to Croce, history is not science, because it is not knowledge of the universal but of the individual, just like art. At the same time, history is not identical with art because the latter represents the possible, whereas history represents reality in story: 'la storia narra'.¹⁴ The elaboration of this thesis took more than twenty years, resulting in Croce's *Filosofia dello spirito*, which initially consisted of three parts: the *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale* (1902), *Logica come scienza del concetto puro* (1909), and *La filosofia della pratica* (1909). These volumes analyse the circle of spirit, or forms of consciousness, beginning with aesthetic intuition, which, expressed in language, forms the basis of philosophy, which in turn forms the basis for 'action' leading to events to be intuited in art thus opening a new circle.¹⁵

In this circle, historical thought plays a crucial role as 'individual judgement' which synthesizes the particular, given by art, and the universal, given by the concepts of philosophy. The individual judgement 'Napoleon was a dictator' gives meaning to a particular image of Napoleon, by applying the predicate 'dictator' and a network of underlying concepts like politics, power, good governance to it. Accordingly, historical narratives must be seen as *racconti-giudizi*, that is, as stories embodying a historical thesis, or individual judgements.

12 Benedetto Croce, *Etica e politica* (Bari: Laterza, 1931) 326; Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action. The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and R.G. Collingwood* (Exeter: Academic Imprint, 2013), 15–19.

13 Croce, *Etica e politica*, 326–327.

14 Benedetto Croce, *Primi Saggi* (Bari: Laterza, 1919), 26.

15 Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, 51–64.

Croce's theory of the historical narrative raises serious questions about their relevance for action. For how can narratives about the past throw sufficient light on present situations? To solve this problem Croce wrote *Teoria e storia della storiografia* as an 'appendix' to the philosophy of the spirit in 1912. Outside Italy this book became Croce's best-known work in the philosophy of history; inside Italy it has become known as 'the second logic'. Its key idea is expressed in the famous dictum 'ogni vera storia è storia contemporanea' [all genuine history is contemporary history] which expresses Croce's view that the past can be made present by re-experiencing it on the basis of documents and in view of our practical interests.¹⁶ Thus, Croce came to defend a moderate constructivist view of history.¹⁷

After *Teoria e storia della storiografia* Croce intended to return to the project of writing the moral and spiritual history of Italy but again he had to postpone the project because of the First World War and its bloody aftermath in Italy, known as the *biennio rosso* [the red i.e., bloody biennium]. As an opponent of Italy's participation in the war, Croce became one of the leading opinion makers of his country and after the war he became deeply involved in politics as Minister of Education, serving until Mussolini's March on Rome on October 28, 1922.¹⁸ After this ominous day, Croce's concern with the rise of fascism increased over the years, turning into public opposition when his former friend and collaborator, the philosopher Giovanni Gentile published *Manifesto degli intellettuali italiani fascisti agli intellettuali di tutte le nazioni* on April 21, 1925. Croce immediately drafted an 'Anti-Manifesto' accusing the fascists that was signed by more than 100 prominent intellectuals.¹⁹ Croce thus became one of the most important opponents to the fascist regime, which tolerated him only because of his international reputation. This extraordinary position enabled Croce to give voice to dissidents in his journal *La Critica* and to finally realise his project of writing a spiritual history of Italy, publishing *Storia di Napoli*, *Storia d'Italia*, and *Storia dell'età barocca* between 1925 and 1929.²⁰

16 Benedetto Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia* 6th ed. (Bari: Laterza, 1948), 4. The term 'vera' is often mistranslated as 'true' but this is misleading since Croce is not primarily concerned with the problem of truth, but with the problem of the nature of history. For this reason, I prefer 'genuine' as a translation of 'vera'.

17 Jack W. Meiland, *Scepticism and historical knowledge* (New York: Random House, 1965) was one of the first to interpret Croce's philosophy of history as a form of 'constructionism'. In my *History as Thought and Action* I have nuanced this interpretation by distinguishing Croce's theory as a form of 'moderate constructivism' from Giovanni Gentile's radical constructivism.

18 Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, 186–191.

19 Ibid., 190–191.

20 Ibid., 199–200.

In these histories Croce practiced what he would preach in Oxford. Each volume is an exercise in 'ethico-political history' in which Croce served 'the religion of liberty' which is based on the historicist credo that humans are free because they make their own history. On this basis, each of Croce's histories reconstructs the ideals which had guided moral and political action in the past in order to throw light on the ideals which guide present actions. This light does not come from simple analogies between past and present situations, but by careful analyses of the application of ideals to actions in past and present. This approach enabled Croce to recognize positive elements in currents of thought he himself was opposed to. In *Storia d'Italia*, for example, Croce describes Marxist socialism as a movement that was 'able to fill the emptiness that ranted in Italian thought and ideals under the influence of a dissolving positivism and a correlative pessimism ... giving young Italians new fire for their hearts and a goal to strive for'.²¹

It was to this kind of ethico-political history Croce was referring in his speech in Oxford, which eventually inspired him to expand his original project with the *Storia d'Europa* in order to reach a wider audience.²² With this volume, which was published in 1932, Croce would have completed his life's work – in 1935 he published a volume with the ironical title *Ultimi Saggi* [last essays] – but increasingly concerned with the worsening political conditions inside and outside Italy, he decided to reflect once more on the problem of the relationship between history and practice. The result of these intense reflections, was *Storia come pensiero e come azione*, which was translated by Sylvia Sprigge as *History as the Story of Liberty* in 1941.²³

3 History as Thought and as Action

The Italian title of the book expresses its main problem: it does not deal with history as thought and action, but as thought *and* as action. Accordingly, the point of the book is not to develop a theory of historical thinking and writing since Croce had amply dealt with that subject in his philosophy of the spirit, but to elaborate a theory of the intrinsic relationship between thought and action. This goal entails, firstly, a demonstration that history is thought and not feeling and emotion, without denying the importance of these forms of experience, however. Croce remarks, referring to Goethe, that his book is a

21 Benedetto Croce, *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915*, 4th ed. (Bari: Laterza, 1985), 142.

22 Benedetto Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimono* (Bari: Laterza, 1932).

23 Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1941).

descent into the 'Reich der Mutter', a journey to the deepest, irrational realms of the human mind, to connect them with the realm of rationality.²⁴ Secondly, Croce intends to show that despite the close connection between history and action, the two should not be identified with each other. The identification of thought and action formed the kernel of Giovanni Gentile's actual idealism which maintained that thought creates reality by reflecting upon itself. Applied to history, this radical constructivism entailed a complete identification of the past and historical writing; the only past we know is the past we construct in thought, or in Gentile's words: *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum* coincide.²⁵ In the works of Gentile and his many fascist followers this constructivist conception of history had led to a myopic presentism Croce so vehemently protested against as a form of anti-historicism because it reduces all development, creativity and individuality to a single act of thought.

4 History as the Story of Liberty

The structure of the book reveals that Croce distinguished several forms of anti-historicism. After stating the principles his own position in part I, he rejects German versions of historicism as forms of 'irrationalism' in part II, goes on to criticize nineteenth-century conceptions of historiography in part III, then elaborates his own views of the relation between historical thought and political and moral action in remaining parts IV to VI. In the latter, Croce attempts to show how historical thinking, in the form of ethico-political thought can protect liberal democracies against the attacks of nationalism, racism, irrationalism, and the new media of his times.

In order to meet this tall demand, Croce lays the theoretical groundwork in part I. He starts from the question which, in his view, confronts all practicing historians: what is the value of a historical work, or in his terms 'what makes a history book historical'? According to Croce it is not its eloquence, nor the number of facts it contains, nor its appeal to the imagination, but its 'historicity'.²⁶ This answer seems to be circular but Croce offers a radical definition of 'historicity' as 'the act of comprehending and understanding induced

²⁴ Ibid., 8.

²⁵ Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, 73, 83–84. For the political and ethical implications of Gentile's constructivism see James Wakefield, *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism: A Study of Actual Idealist Moral Theory* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2015).

²⁶ Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, 17. Sprigge translates 'historicity' as 'historical merit' which does not rightly catch Croce's meaning.

by the requirements of practical life'.²⁷ Croce thus views 'historicity' as a normative requirement for writing history; a book on history is truly historical only if it constitutes an act of thought that aims at solving practical problems. Crucially, this act of thought takes the form of stating a historical problem, which can be solved only by interpreting the available documents on the basis of philosophical concepts. Since practical needs lay at the origin of historical thinking, Croce repeats his famous dictum: 'all genuine history is contemporary history'.²⁸

In *Storia come pensiero e come azione* Croce steers this conception of the contemporaneity of history away from a radical constructivist position in the following passage:

We are products of the past and we live immersed in the past, which encompasses us. How can we move towards the new life, how to create new activities without getting out of the past and without placing ourselves above it? And how can we place ourselves above the past if we are in it and it is in us? There is no other way out except through thought, which does not break off relations with the past but rises ideally above it and converts it into knowledge. The past must be faced or, not to speak in metaphors, it must be reduced to a *mental problem* which can find its solution in a proposition of truth, the ideal premise for our new activity and our new life.²⁹

In this passage Croce's expresses his 'immanentist' view of the relation between past and present on which he founds his position. We are *in* the past, because it is everywhere around us, and vice versa the past is *in* us since we are the products of the past. Admittedly, it is difficult to understand this idea but in old cities like Naples the living past may be seen at every street corner, or in the deep archaeological layers below them, and also in the tradition and culture of the city and the hearts and minds of its inhabitants.

Central to Croce's immanentism is the idea that even though we are products of the past, it does not determine us. We are not 'prisoners of the past', Croce says, because we can get out of it by reflecting upon it. Crucially, this reflection takes the form of problematizing; it is only by raising problems about the past that we can free ourselves from it. The solutions to our historical problems provide the 'premises' for action, that is, historical thought provides

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 19.

²⁹ Ibid., 43–44 (emphasis added).

the knowledge we need in order to act in a rational way. Hence, the 'cathartic' or 'liberating' function of historical thinking has two senses. Firstly, it is by raising problems about the past that we can distance ourselves from it, and secondly, it is by solving these problems that we provide ourselves with the necessary actionable knowledge to make new history. By thus focusing on the practical function of the historians' questioning activity, Croce offers a view of historians as 'reflective practitioners'.³⁰ In Croce's view historians are not mere spectators who observe (past) reality to make statements about it but, viewing reality as history, they actively participate in it by asking questions to provide actionable knowledge.

This radical view of the practical function of historical thinking opens a Pandora's box of new problems concerning truth and objectivity, for if historians are both products of and participants in the processes they are studying, how can they ever write reliable narratives? Croce was fully aware of these problems, which are central to his immanentist conception of history. Moreover, being 'deeply immersed' in the anti-historicist quagmire around him, he realized that if he wanted to save historicism, the first problem he had to solve was the problem of the relationship between the historian's thought and the historical process.

Croce's strategy on this point was to extend the entire dialectic of problems and solutions to history as a process. Thus, for Croce, just like every historical or philosophical thesis should be interpreted as an answer to a question raised in specific historical circumstances, every past action should be viewed as a solution to a problem, in the particular sense of an act of thought by which the actors liberate themselves above their pasts in which they were immersed as products of the past. From this viewpoint, the past appears as a process to which human beings contributed by creatively solving practical problems to be reconstructed by historical thought, which also operates as a dialectic of problems and solutions. In Croce's own words: 'this activity is its own peculiar enrichment, the perpetual growth of its own spirituality, so that nothing is lost of that which is created and in no way is perpetual progress arrested'.³¹ To say that 'reality is history, and nothing but history', which is the first principle of historicism, therefore means that reality is a process of problems and solutions which develops itself by raising and solving problems about itself.

Most of Croce's interpreters who identified his position with constructivism have not fully understood the full meaning of his argument. Only George

30 Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1983).

31 Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, 51.

Allan, who is a relative outsider to Croce studies, has likened Croce's ontology to Whitehead's process metaphysics, arguing that both stress the notion of 'creativity' as its prime category.³² In this context, Allan rightly points out that whereas Whitehead identifies the creative principle with God, Croce identifies it with 'history' in the sense of a self-reflective process of problems and solutions, which is closer to Hegel's idea of history. Yet, like Whitehead, Croce views this process of problems and solutions as having an objective status, though he is never fully explicit on this point, probably because he was overcautious about confounding his ontology with speculative philosophies of history in the manner of Vico or Hegel. Croce had criticized the former's idea of Divine Providence as an unwarranted form of teleology, and the latter's dialectic as a confusion of opposite and distinct concepts which had led to Hegel's misinterpretations of historical processes.³³

To avoid this kind of speculation, Croce deliberately kept away from metaphysical and ontological musings in order to focus on conceptual issues. In this vein, Croce had presented philosophy as nothing more, but also nothing less than the 'methodology of history' in *Teoria e storia della storiografia*. In *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, he accentuates the same conceptual approach as follows: 'Historicism is a logical principle; it is, in fact, the very category of logic; it is logicity in its full acceptation, the logicity of the concrete universal, and therefore, as we have already remarked, alive and always more or less at work in the human mind.'³⁴ By taking historicism as a logical principle, Croce makes it clear that the dialectic of problems and solutions by which humans problematize the past in order to take action, must be viewed as a universal principle which applies to all human thought and action. Accordingly, history as a process takes the form of this dialectic, that is, every event in the past can be seen as the outcome of actions which solve particular problems in time. On this point, the full meaning of the book comes to the fore: both as thought and as action history must be seen as a process of problems and solutions, or more precisely, history is a self-referential process which by reflecting on past problems and solutions tries to solve present problems.

Given the objective status of the past, the task of historical thought is not to construct past events, as actual idealism held, but to reconstruct them on the basis of evidence. In this context it is significant that Croce never uses constructivist language to describe the historian's activities; ethical-political historians do not *construct*, but *reconstruct* past ideals in order to clarify present

32 George Allan, "Croce and Whitehead on Concrescence," *Process Studies* 2 (1972), 95–111.

33 Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, 46–50, 128–132.

34 Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, 78.

ideals. This language reveals that Croce, in spite of his distrust of metaphysics and ontology, attributed an objective status to historical reality. In this context, he was keen not identify historical reality with a single process having a single goal as Vico and Hegel held. Importantly, in contrast to Hegel, who had maintained that history was the gradual development toward liberty, Croce held that liberty is present in the act of thought by which humans raise themselves above the past they are immersed in. Or, in Croce's own terms: liberty is immanent to historical thinking; history realizes liberty.³⁵

5 Combating Anti-historicism

After forging his theoretical tools, Croce then enters the arena with Meinecke, Troeltsch, Cassirer, and Heussi, who had recently argued that the 'irrational' should be reckoned with as a 'force' in history, that is, feelings and emotions should be taken into account to understand humans in the past. Croce agrees with this view, but opposing a pure distinction between emotions and thought, he argues that the apparently 'irrationality' of actions and events disappears once we try to understand how humans in the past sought to overcome their passions by thought guided by their ideals. In other words, we should not abstract the 'irrational' as a single 'factor' in history, but seek to understand how rationality has dealt with the irrational as a problem.³⁶

Part III carries the provocative title 'History without a Problem'. It makes short work of the 'pure historian' Ranke and his counterpart Burckhardt, the founder of cultural history. In Croce's view both historians, despite their differences, wrote without a truly historical problem in mind since they did not aim at solving practical problems of their days. Ranke's ideal of objectivity was not much more than a veil for his 'narrow conservatism' just like Burckhardt's impressionism masks his lack of philosophical acumen.³⁷ The only nineteenth-century historian Croce somewhat valued was Droysen, who had rightly stressed that all historical thinking starts from asking questions, though he had not understood their practical function.³⁸

More constructive is Croce's view of historical documents in Part IV, which he describes as:

³⁵ Ibid., 62.

³⁶ Ibid., 66–67. For a critical account of Croce's interpretation of Meinecke, see Reinbert Krol, *Germany's Conscience: Friedrich Meinecke: Champion of German Historicism* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2021).

³⁷ Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, 102–103.

³⁸ Ibid., 133.

All the works of the past which can live to us through handwriting, musical notations, in pictures, in sculpture and in architecture, in technical equipment, in alterations of the crust of the earth, in profoundly spiritual transformations, in the changes suffered by political, moral and religious institutions, in the growth of virtues and sentiments which have gradually been formed in the course of centuries and are still alive and active in us.³⁹

Crucially, Croce here describes 'documents' as products of the past which live on in the present. This description is completely in line with Croce's ontology; resulting from 'changes suffered' and in the 'growth of virtues and sentiments', documents must be seen as concrete universals, that is, as products of processes which solved particular problems raised in particular situations in the past. In Croce's own terminology 'documents' are 'opere', that is, works, or artefacts, which embody the past in the present, thus providing a first entrance to the problems from which they arose. As a historian of ideas, Croce based his own histories mostly on poetry, historiography and philosophy, which he interpreted as embodiments of the ideals which guided writers in the past.

The climax of Croce's fight against anti-historicism can be found in the chapters on politics and morality in which he confronts his view of historical thinking with anti-historical tendencies. Again, as in the chapters on historicism, Croce takes issue with the notion of 'irrationality' in political historiography. Historians should beware of the so-called irrationality of humans and focus on reconstructing the ideals that guided past actions. Thus, the darkness of the Middle Ages disappeared once historians began to understand how it gave rise to new forms of spirituality, to new languages, and to new forms of communal liberty. In the same vein, historians discarded the alleged 'decadence of Rome' when they began to understand how the Empire sought to deal with the rise of Christianity.⁴⁰ As both examples show, the point in historical understanding is to find the right perspective to reconstruct past ideals. This reconstruction is a dialectical process between past and present ideals which may lead to a change of perspective. One who abhors the atrocities of Genghis Khan from a civil perspective, for example, may admire the way he organized his troops from a military perspective.⁴¹ Croce is prepared to apply the reconstruction of ideals to politics, but in this context, he wryly identifies politicians with criminals:

39 Ibid., 114.

40 Ibid., 162.

41 Ibid., 150.

Even among bands of political adventurers and of brigands and of other criminal associations one looks to find where they have recruited and how they have administered their forces, and how their rules of life are related as means to an end, and how rational within these terms the relation is.⁴²

This example, which clearly refers to Mussolini and Hitler, shows that political rationality comes close to historical understanding, but Croce is adamant that it should not be identified with it. Politicians act by blindly trusting their 'faith' whereas critical minds scrutinize their faith by raising new doubts and problems. For this reason, politicians do not really aim at understanding people and the world, but only seek to know them in order to 'manage' and 'dominate' them.⁴³ In Croce's view, only 'the poet, the philosopher, and the historian really know man, and from what they have seen in moments of inspiration and in the peace of meditation, those ideals are born which warm the heart and point the way of action'.⁴⁴

This understanding of ideals forms the basis of moral judgements in history. In line with his general ontology, these should not primarily concern the intentions of the actors, but their works:

As, in the history of poetry, the poetry is important and not the intentions or other concerns of the men-poets, and in the history of philosophy it is the newly formed and more profound concepts and not the intentions and the passions of the men-philosophers (who, like the poets, often behaved in a contrary and different way to their intentions, yet sometimes, in the midst of inglorious passions and unworthy actions, rose to visions of the truth), so similarly in the history of practical life it is the new political and moral institutions which form the object of judgment and not the intentions and the illusions contributed by their originators or their executors.⁴⁵

By this historicist version of the biblical saying 'by their fruits you will recognize them', Croce wishes to underscore that ideals are more important than intentions in the sense of intentions. When we seek guidance from the past to solve a present problem, we should study the 'works' of the past as they come to us in

42 Ibid., 164.

43 Ibid., 177.

44 Ibid., 177n.

45 Ibid., 210–211.

the form of documents or evidence. And in this study of the works, we should not focus on the contingent intentions of their authors, but on the ideals that informed the problems they had to solve in order to free themselves from the past they were immersed in. To Croce, ideals are 'immanent-transcendent'; they are immanent in the sense that each individual author tries to realize them in his or her works, but at the same time, they transcend these individual works as universal guidelines.

6 Croce's Abiding Relevance

What is the relevance of Croce's *La storia come pensiero e come azione*? Can Croce's ideas be applied to current debates in philosophy and history? Can contemporary philosophers of history learn something from his work? To these questions Croce himself would have reacted with great reluctance. From his point of view, there are no general answers to questions because every individual understands them in his or her own way.

The reception of *La storia come pensiero e come azione* amply illustrates this principle. In Italy, the book immediately raised new questions about the relevance of historicism, leading to a debate between Croce and the historian and philosopher Guido de Ruggiero, who severely criticized Croce's historicism and pleads for a return to an enlightened rationalism in *Il ritorno alla ragione*.⁴⁶ After the war, some Italian commentators viewed the book as Croce's 'third logic' which formed the starting point of his ultimate, 'vitalist' revision of the philosophy of the spirit.⁴⁷

Outside Italy, *La storia come pensiero e come azione* inspired R.G. Collingwood, who read the book while writing *The Principles of History* on his voyage to the Dutch East Indies.⁴⁸ Its first chapter, which deals with the problem of the certainty of historical knowledge by comparing it to mathematics, definitely owes a lot to Croce's discussion on evidence.⁴⁹ To Maurice Mandelbaum, the ideas expressed in *La storia come pensiero e come azione* amounted to the form of relativism which he rejected in his seminal *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* published in 1938.⁵⁰ In the same vein, T.M. Knox, in his 1946 preface

46 Guido de Ruggiero, *Il ritorno alla ragione* (Bari: Laterza, 1946).

47 Gennaro Sasso, *Benedetto Croce e ricerca della dialettica* (Naples: Morano, 1975).

48 Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, 282.

49 Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, 113, n 1.

50 Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge. An Answer to Relativism* (New York: Liveright, 1938), 327. Mandelbaum, who was well acquainted with all of Croce's

to Collingwood's *The Idea of History*, blamed Croce for liquidating philosophy by converting it to history to develop a form of relativist historicism which eventually contaminated his own tutor Collingwood.⁵¹ Even more negative was Isaiah Berlin, who in 1952 publicly distanced himself from both Croce and Collingwood in the famous journal *Mind*. Blaming his former inspirators for not taking materialism seriously, he opined that they had placed themselves 'outside the ranks of the intellectual innovators of our time' without giving any argument for this claim.⁵² For decades, defamations like these coloured the reception of Croce's ideas in the entire English-speaking world. For a long time, it was a matter of course to push Croce's philosophy aside as relativist idealism, or historicism *tout court*. Symptomatic of this approach is the authoritative *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* which does not deem Croce's philosophy of history worthy of discussion, framing the man himself as a 'fallen star'.⁵³

Verdicts like this show that *Storia come pensiero e come azione* has not yet been understood. Though Croce wrote his book as a reflection on his campaign against the nihilist immorality of 'anti-historicism', most interpreters have read the book as a defence of 'historicism' which they tacitly identified with epistemological relativism and moral relativism. Probably for this reason, philosopher Jack W. Meiland, who took Croce's ideas as a starting point for his own constructivist theory of history, never found wide response, whereas Leon Goldstein, who almost never referred to Croce, has been accepted as one of the founders of constructivism.⁵⁴

In retrospect, even Hayden White's article 'The Abiding Relevance of Croce's Idea of History' published in 1963, did not do much to change the picture because in *Metahistory*, published ten years later, he criticized Croce's

works, also quotes from his articles in *La Critica*, which form the kernel of *La storia come pensiero e come azione*.

- 51 T. M. Knox, "Editor's Preface," in R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), x.
- 52 I. Berlin, "Review of Croce's 'My Philosophy and Other Essays,'" selected by R. Klibansky, *Mind* 61 (1952), 577. For an overview of Croce's reception in Great Britain see Rik Peters, "Companions of Thought and Faith? The reception of Croce's philosophy in the United Kingdom," *La diffusione internazionale dell'opera di Benedetto Croce. Atti del Convegno, Napoli 22–23 settembre 2016, nel centocinquantesimo della nascita (1866–2016)*, ed. Teresa Leo (Rubbettino Editore: Soveria Mannelli, 2020), 57–83.
- 53 Gary Kemp, "Croce's Aesthetics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/croceaesthetics> (accessed 10 September 2019).
- 54 Rik Peters, "Realism and Constructivism," *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy and Theory of History*, ed. Chiel van den Akker (forthcoming).

philosophy of history as a defence of an 'agnostic irony', that is, the view that historians should keep distance from contemporary issues.⁵⁵ Central to this reading of Croce is his own constructivist narrativism which, as White later avowed, has much in common with Gentile's actualism.⁵⁶ This position, which tacitly embraces the latter's identity of thought and action, presents the ideal historian as 'taking action' in the present by constructing narratives about the past. From this point of view, Croce's idea of historians who, *before* taking action, try to reconstruct the past which has led to the present they find themselves in, appears as an ironic attempt to take distance from the present. But White's interpretation of Croce's philosophy of history fails to do justice to his attempt in *Storia come pensiero e come azione* to defend the practical value of history without embracing a radical constructivist position. As we have seen, Croce tried to solve this problem by stressing that historical thought itself is a product of the past. Accordingly, historians do not construct the past in their stories, but they reconstruct it. Most importantly, these reconstructions do not aim to naively render the past 'wie es eigentlich geschehen', but to understand current problems from a historical point of view, so that history is both thought and action. Hayden White, however, in his activist zeal to set historians free from 'realism', focused on the 'azione' in *Storia come pensiero e come azione*, and the cost of the 'pensiero'. Most importantly, he overlooked the 'e', that is, the view that 'history' is a complex interaction of *both* thought *and* action in a complex interaction of past *and* present.

After *Metahistory*, philosophers of history took White's interpretation of Croce's philosophy of history for granted in spite of David Roberts's multiple attempts to rescue Croce's ideas as a form of 'mundane historicism'.⁵⁷ Eventually, to many philosophers of history, White's verdict provided an excuse to neglect Croce's ideas altogether, thus setting them free to elaborate positions that eventually came glaringly close to forms of anti-historicism.⁵⁸

55 Rik Peters, "Nolite iudicare: Hayden White between Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile," *Storia della Storiografia* 58 (2010), 25–26; Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 28–33.

56 Peters, "Nolite iudicare," 31–34.

57 David Roberts, *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987); David Roberts, *Nothing but History, Reconstruction and Extremity after Metaphysics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); David Roberts, *Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). For a critical account see: Rik Peters, "Italian Legacies," *History and Theory* 49 (2010), 115–129.

58 Rik Peters, "Actes de présence: Presence in Fascist Political Culture," *History and Theory* 45 (2006), 362–374.

Infinitely more important than the developments in philosophy of history are the recent invasions of anti-historicism in practical and political life all over the world. If philosophers of history intend to contribute to countering these ominous developments, they should finally take Croce's lessons seriously. For if philosophers of history want to answer the rise of post-truth, fake news, tribalism, and other forms of irrationalism, they will have to rethink the relationship between past and present, and between thought and action. In this project, philosophers of history can learn from the way Croce developed from his first narrativist position to the moderate constructivism of his *Logica*, to the sophisticated realism, or objective idealism of *La storia come pensiero e come azione*. In this respect, it is telling that Hayden White on the last page of his last book muses about Croce's *Storia come pensiero e come azione* as an attempt to define the 'substantiality of history' as a condition for the 'practical past'.⁵⁹ Referring to the English translation of the book, this means for White to rethink history as the story of liberty, that is, history as the narrative of a 'world in which thought and action were substantially "free" alone could produce a world whose substance was itself "historical"'.⁶⁰

In my view, White's last words can be read as an appeal to philosophers of history to reread Croce's *Storia come pensiero e come azione* as a 'story of liberty'. This means, in the first place, that philosophers of history will have to rethink how historical thinking and writing can be relevant for solving practical problems in the present. This approach will entail that they no longer focus on historians as spectators of the past, but active participants in history.⁶¹ In order to counter an all too activist account of the historian's activities, they may start from Croce's innovative extension of the dialectic of problems and solutions to the past itself. This ontology not only gives the past an objective status regarding the historian's reconstructions, but also a structural element, or in Croce's terms, a 'logical principle' without turning history into a teleological process. This realist, or objective idealist ontology is as relevant for countering contemporary forms of radical constructivism as it was for Croce for countering the radical constructivists and irrationalist historicists of his time. Most importantly, this ontology forms the foundation of Croce's inspiring appeal to

59 Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 102–103. White's thoughts about the importance of the substantiality of history show that in the end he was closer to Croce's idea of the practical past than to Oakeshott's from which he began.

60 White, *Practical Past*, 103.

61 Rik Peters, "Calliope's ascent: defragmenting philosophy of history by rhetoric," *Rethinking History* 20 (2016), 235–258.

historians and philosophers to reconstruct the ideals which guided past problems and solutions in order to take action in the present. After all, nowadays, as in Croce's time, people no longer care to dress in silk; we are increasingly being confronted with the rise of populism, tyranny, dogmatism and other forms of anti-historicism. To counter those forms of anti-historicism, we, silkworms like Croce, must continue spinning by ourselves.

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