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# Croce and His Critical Successors

UNIVERSITÀ

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## Foreword

### Thinkers Under the Influence of Fascism

#### Introduction

Amidst an ever-growing affluence of knowledge today, what knowledge are we supposed to trust? I believe it is the kind that is the result of writers grappling with the issues of their times. Since what is written remains, writers can impart knowledge not only to their own but also future generations and bequeath traces of their lives. Moreover, that which is written will be subject to criticism in the future. I believe that when writers are conscious of this, they are disciplined and cautious in their writings, which gives birth to trustworthy knowledge.

The characters appearing in this book are thinkers who continued to ponder the relationship between knowledge and life throughout their rapidly changing times. The protagonist is Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), whose thoughts and ideas this book centres on.

Croce lived in a totalitarian world that, at the time, no one had ever experienced before (1). Totalitarianism had not come about suddenly. The modern Kingdom of Italy emerged in 1861, out of a unification movement. Despite the fact that

Italy was established as a state that advocated freedom, various ideological tides emerged from this supposedly free nation, ultimately culminating in fascism. It is an issue that can be said to be prevalent even today. This book focuses on the question of how to protect freedom from totalitarianism. It goes without saying that this question is not a discussion of political systems. From the standpoint of history of ideologies, it is about how we, who have inherited and taken over the ideas from previous generations, can increase – even if slightly – the possibility of maintaining our freedom.

Croce initially favoured fascism but daringly disagreed with it as soon as its totalitarian tendencies began to influence academia. However, upon investigating Croce's ideas *vis-à-vis* freedom, it turns out that it is in fact not an issue that can be dealt with by limiting one's focus merely to Croce and the society of his time – it is something that has to be discussed in the context of Croce as well as his critical successors. Furthermore, if one were to indeed critically investigate the fascist experience, it would be necessary to grasp the phenomenon from its various angles. Croce's critical successors presented in this book are Gioacchino Volpe (1876-1971), Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), and Ernesto De Martino (1908-65). Their political views span across the board. If Croce was a liberal, Volpe – while belonging to the liberal wing – was more accurately a national liberal and fascist trying to gain political consensus from a wider range of society; Gramsci, however, was a communist, and De Martino a socialist after having temporarily resonated with fascism. Despite these political differences, or even flat-out irreconcilabilities with Croce, all of them were intricately linked to one another in their efforts to contribute to the generation of universal knowl-



edge. Moreover, all of them relied on Croce's thought as their greatest point of reference. In this sense, they are his critical successors. It was only as a result of each of these thinkers developing their thoughts in their respective academic fields that each thinker extracted from them the historical thought essential to the maintenance of freedom. Taking away from the conclusion, Croce described this historical thought as 'Ethical-Political History' or 'Civil History', Volpe as 'History of the Nation', Gramsci as 'History of the Subaltern', and De Martino as 'Folkloric History'. This book traces the development of these thoughts in detail.

To understand their ideas, it is necessary to remain aware of their respective historical backgrounds. Looking back at the Italian society of their time, the 1930s were characterized by a fascist regime and the 1940s were a turbulent period spanning the collapse of fascism. Therefore, first, I would like to review the emergence of fascism from the perspective of history of ideologies while referring to previous research on the topic (2).

## National Concept and Fascism

Fascism may have risen after World War I, but its ideological origins can be traced farther back. The ideas that ultimately merged into fascism, such as futurism, nationalism, and revolutionary syndicalism, had all existed since early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Both Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) and Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944) were aware of these trends as they worked on their ideas. Nationalism, the most radical amongst these early 20th-century ideas, later constituted the core of fas-

cism, but nationalist thought itself can be traced back even further, to Jacobinism and Romanticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This is to say that fascism incorporated the national concept, which has its roots in the period of national unification, into its own principle. This is where the secret of the power of fascist ideology lies.

This national concept itself contained in its symbol system elements difficult for people to separate from, which explains its powerful mobilization capability. These elements include women and family communities, men's military abilities and honour, as well as religiousness (3). The Italian people were conceptualized as a fabricated consanguineous group whose individuals shared a common mother and were, thus, connected as siblings. To maintain one's honour, for men, meant protecting the innocence of women and managing the boundaries of their community by their military ability, and for women, it meant remaining pure. Those who lost their lives fighting for the community were remembered as martyrs. Amongst those who shaped the national discourse, the one who emphasized this religious aspect was writer and revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-72), who had moulded the democratic ideological core during the Italian unification movement. He even went as far as proclaiming that the Italian people had been given a divine mission of civilization, defining its importance.

## Change in the National Concept in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The Italian national concept of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century had first emerged amongst intellectuals mainly through the works of

writers U. Foscolo, G. Berchet, and M. d'Azeglio, and spread to larger portions of the population through education and the military after the establishment of the Italian liberal state. Fascism seized – so to speak – this concept with a history of at least one hundred years and recast it by adding other useful elements found in various new ideas that had appeared after the turn of the century. The national concept had been developed in the first place as the main constituent of the Italian revolution against Austria. However, in Mussolini's era, 'nation' was a concept that had its foundation in syndicalism (including G. Sorel's *Reflection on Violence*) and V. Pareto's elite theory and referred to the minority that aimed to revolutionize parliament. The group supposed to revolutionize this Italy was no longer assumed to centre around one particular class (e.g. the proletariat). The proletariat was no longer characterized by an intention to revolutionize the bourgeoisie, which held the real political power, but by hatred towards groups that contributed to political authority and were satisfied with the current situation in Italy, coming from those who produced, yet whose political voices would not be heard. Some of them were bourgeois, others proletarian. It was they who were supposed to come together to demand for a new Italy. In this way, enemies and allies were no longer divided hierarchically and horizontally, but in a vertical manner across classes. The economic side of syndicalism, with the general strike as its ideological core, faded into the background, while its political aspect of seizing power through violence was pushed to the fore. This anti-parliamentarist stance links to the World War I participation movement, fuelled by the claim that a new 'nation' could only be created through war.