
Fabio F. Rizi’s fine book *Benedetto Croce and Italian Fascism* closes a gap in the historiography on fascism and illuminates the gray area of tension where culture and politics, freedom and coercion coexist. In a broad ideological framework, this book may be placed within the revisionist movement initiated by the eminent historian Renzo De Felice. The aim of this school is to re-evaluate, in light of new documents and sober meditation, some aspects of fascism and of Mussolini’s international and domestic policies. Within this perspective, the philosopher Benedetto Croce becomes somehow larger than life and, in Rizi’s words, stands as the “symbol of the resistance” to fascism.

Apart from the introduction, Rizi’s book can be divided into three main thematic parts. The first (35-79) analyses Croce’s reasons for participating as Minister of Education in Giovanni Giolitti’s government of 1920-21 and the turbulent years (1921-1924) when Croce lent his senatorial support and intellectual prestige to Mussolini and fascism, even after the brutal assassination of the socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti. The second part (80-212) explores the years of the dictatorship proper: from Mussolini’s speech of 3 January 1925, that officially inaugurated state repression, to World War II, the period of Croce’s prudent but firm opposition to fascism. The third and final part (213-267) probes the background leading to Croce’s ministerial responsibility in 1944, in General Badoglio’s government—a government in which all the antifascist parties, even the Communist Party, were represented.

In the Introduction, the reader learns that Croce was the heir of a wealthy family from Abruzzo that settled in Naples and became well connected to the local aristocracy. To his family’s social status and wealth, Croce added his own high intellectual prestige and revenues from royalties for his many successful books. Further, in 1910, the king appointed Croce senator for life. Besides adding political clout to his strong intellectual personality, this position provided Croce with parliamentary immunity even when, during the fascist regime, Italy was headed by an anomalous diarchy, the king and Mussolini or, better still, Mussolini first and the king second.

Throughout the book, Rizi follows with keen interest the friendship and intellectual collaboration between Croce and Giovanni Gentile, the sagacious Sicilian philosopher. Together they revived Idealist philosophy in Italy carrying out an effective critique of both positivistic determinism and Marxism. Through the writings of Antonio Labriola and the activities of the Socialist Party, at the turn of the twentieth century Marxism had become a cultural and political protagonist in the Italian landscape. Initially Croce (as did Gentile) studied Marx’s works, but he soon abandoned the study of economics, which he considered to be less important, to concentrate on aesthetics. On this point, odd as it may seem, the philosopher Croce and the decadent poet Gabriele D’Annunzio shared a common cultural matrix: the field of aesthetics.

Fascism, however, brought the Croce-Gentile cultural partnership to a bitter
end: unable to navigate through the treacherous, fascist political waters, their philosophical ship floundered and its helmsmen parted ways. Embracing fascism, Gentile theorized the use of the “manganello” (cudgel) to induce stubborn individuals to change their mind and become socially healthy, while Croce, who initially supported fascism, moved decisively in the opposite direction and defended individual freedom.

Croce's writing career during the dictatorship is thoroughly documented throughout Rizi's book. Croce continued to write and publish books, essays, and his biting periodical, La Critica, which came out every two months. In an implicit (never explicit) polemic against the regime, in all his works Croce maintained that freedom and only freedom is the true protagonist of human destiny. Because of his unwavering stand, he became a standard-bearer for the moderate antifascists who had remained in the country. Even during the fascist years, Croce's home in Naples and his summer residence in Turin were open to old-line politicians, moderate conservatives, scholars and students who sought his advice, help, friendship, support, and counsel.

A generous man of means with worldwide connections, Croce financially helped needy intellectuals and aided others to publish their books and essays. He wrote letters of introduction for scholars who, like Gaetano Salvemini and Arnaldo Momigliano, forced by fascist violence and racial legislation to leave the country, sought academic positions abroad. On a few occasions, he even appeared in court as a character witness in defence of antifascists accused of subversion.

Though “discretely” watched by police and spied on by informers, Croce was free to travel at home and abroad. He used this “privilege” to meet kindred spirits with whom he would discuss philosophy, politics, social affairs, and personal matters. He carried out these activities openly and with dignity even after fascists invaded his home in 1926, destroyed some furniture and papers, and damaged a few books.

Because of his firm stand, men of the calibre of Antonio Gramsci, founder of the Italian Communist Party, British philosopher Robert Collingwood, journalists Walter Lippmann in the United States and James Minifie in Canada, as well as other equally eminent men and women around the world, respected and admired Croce for his intellectual honesty.

Rizi details and documents all these aspects very well. Permeated with illuminating critical insights, the final part, particularly chapter 12, is the best part of the book. As a consequence of the disastrous war bulletins from all war fronts and the misery at home, which resulted in a series of industrial strikes, from the fall of 1942 the fascist regime began disintegrating. The supporting pillars of the system—industrialists, the army, the Crown, and the Vatican—looked for a way out of the collapsing edifice. At the heart of the regime, the Fascist Grand Council, the few dissenting voices grew to become the majority. The dictator had lost his grip on the country and the area where freedom and coercion coexisted became a murky zone: antifascists of all stripes became emboldened; the defunct Liberal Party was brought to life; clandestine newspapers were printed, distributed and read.

During those months, the aging philosopher experienced a resurgence of a
youthful energy and, as Rizi writes, "Croce was actively involved in political activities, mostly of conspiratorial nature" (235). After the Armistice, in September 1943, fearing a leftwing take-over of the country, the Allies under Winston Churchill's direction elected the old liberal class as the main point of reference for post-war Italy. However, as Rizi demonstrates, Croce refused to play Churchill's game, which aimed at maintaining the fascist apparatus by substituting Mussolini with the king. For his participation in the Badoglio government, Rizi says, Croce stipulated three conditions: 1) "abdication of the king and his son Umberto"; 2) "a government supported by all anti-Fascist parties"; and 3) an "expanded war effort to free the country from the Germans" (239). However, facing British opposition and the king's refusal to abdicate, Croce, a realist, accepted to be part of the government on the king's word that he would abdicate in favour of his son as soon as Rome became liberated. On the institutional question, helped by the new policy (the svolta di Salerno) of the Italian Communist Party, Croce succeeded in convincing the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale, which intended to proclaim Italy a Republic in 1944, to abandon such an unwise decision.

Aside from these and other valid aspects, however, in my view the book leaves the reader with the impression that Croce's cultural influence dominated the Italian middle class during this period. In reality, Croce's liberal thought lingered among highbrow intellectuals and never, neither before nor during the fascist regime, permeated the various sectors of antisocialist, middle class culture and politics. Businessmen, university graduates, middle and high-level bureaucrats, professionals, army officers, artists and poets were under the spell of several irrational and anti-democratic movements: nationalism, futurism, syndicalism, and the thought of Gabriele D'Annunzio, a poet and the preacher of Nietzsche's theory of the Superman in Italy, to mention only the most vociferous.

In their common anti-positivist and anti-socialist matrix, these groups and their iconoclastic movements recognized a remote paternity in Croce's thought. These anti-democratic movements imposed on the country their political agenda against his liberal teaching: the invasion of Libya in 1911, the Great War in 1915, the Fiume adventure in 1919, fascism in 1922 and its several violent convulsions till its tragically grotesque epilogue in the fascist Republic of Salò.

In the early 1920s, the eighty-year-old Giolitti and his liberal clan, which included Croce, encouraged and fostered these irrational trends as a way to bar the socialists from power. In the election of 1921, Giolitti (whom Salvemini rightly branded as the minister "della mala vita") created the "national blocks," an ambiguous alliance among unscrupulous liberals, democrats, and fascists. Thanks to this electoral gimmick, Mussolini succeeded where he had failed twice before (as a socialist in 1913 and as a fascist in 1919): he was elected to Parliament. Further, the liberal clan supported Mussolini and his governments in Parliament and in the Senate up until the end of 1924.

Benedetto Croce and Italian Fascism also does not, in my view, address adequately at least two important and interdependent questions: 1) why Croce enjoyed relative freedom of speech and movement; and 2) why Croce (and the few liberal senators) "returned" or "donated" his senatorial gold medal for the
Ethiopian cause in 1936. In answering the first question, Rizi writes: “Mussolini did not engage in direct and extreme persecution of Croce primarily out of political considerations but also, perhaps, because he regarded the great man with a certain respect” (212). The reason for the regime’s special treatment of Croce can be found more likely in the fact that Croce’s living-room antifascism had no link with real life and politics, so Mussolini considered it innocuous “Platonic” talk. Long before fascism, Labriola reproached Croce for his lack of interest in the miserable condition of working people. In a letter, Labriola wrote, “Regarding the politics of the proletariat, you are neither for nor against (“né convieni né disconvieni”), and choose to ignore 95% of the people and their problems.” He added, “since your interest in Marxism is merely theoretical, you avoid being associated with people for whom Marxism and anti-Marxism [Proletariat versus Capitalism or Socialism versus Fascism] are symbols and banners” of a cause.

On this point, it may not be too far-fetched to argue, as Denis Mack Smith has done, that fascism and the liberal clan or Mussolini and Croce arrived at what might be considered an armed truce. They both stood one step away from that unmarked area where the theory incarnates itself in practical activity or politics and politics or practical activity finds its reason for being in the theory: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John). The regime safeguarded its political agenda by “discreetly” keeping an eye on Croce; and Croce “prudently” preached freedom in the abstract. In the same way that Gramsci (who was in a fascist jail) avoided censorship by using the phrase “filosofia della prassi” instead of Marxism, Croce avoided provoking the regime by using phrases like “authoritarian movements,” “anti-historicism” or “irrationalism,” instead of the word “fascism.” Both Croce and Mussolini observed the mutually convenient and unmarked dividing line, separating theory and practice.

Within this framework we can also place the episode of the gold medal that Croce returned for the Ethiopian campaign. Citing Croce’s patriotism or the semantic quibbles between the words “donated” used by fascist propaganda and “returned” used by Croce, as Rizi does, does not explain Croce’s behaviour. Unlike philosophy, in politics, specifically in this case, what counts is the action not the semantic distinction between the subtle meanings of the words in question. It is more likely that Croce and his liberal senator friends did not want to provoke the regime and “prudently” acquiesced to the “order” politely imparted by the President of the Senate, Luigi Federzoni, who diplomatically “asked” senators to give their golden medal to the cause. Though perhaps secretly, Croce (they all) approved of a popular imperial conquest as he had done in the Libyan war of 1911-12.

Given that no book is ever exempt from some form of questioning, no matter how fine the book may be, Rizi’s work makes an important contribution to Croce studies. With a wealth of old and new materials, it documents Croce’s many cultural and extra-cultural activities during the fascist dictatorship: his towering personality (firm character, ethical standard, and dignity as a thinker, a public figure, and a private man) emerges clear and tall. Benedetto Croce and Italian Fascism is thus essential reading for anyone interested in Croce’s life and thought.
fascism and the maze of its domestic policy, as well as the cultural and political history of Italy and Europe.

ANGELO PRINCIPE
(Toronto)


Claudio Fogu’s book is a very interesting addition to the corpus of cultural studies on the politics of culture and history in fascist Italy. The main purpose of this volume is to study the “fascist politics of history in 1920s and 1930s Italy in order to show the centrality of this field of cultural production to the formation and evolution of a fascist-modernist mass culture” (6–7). Fogu defines the “politics of history,” as “the vision of the relationship between historical agency, representation, and consciousness elaborated by fascist ideologists, and its institutionalization into mental, discursive, and visual images designed for mass consumption” (7). This conceptualization shows the necessity of bringing together a variety of disciplines, such as history, philosophy, anthropology, and to some extent literature, in order to understand Mussolini’s vision and his wish to reshape not only Italy but, indeed, Italians during his dictatorship. Such a conceptualization is the key to understanding the dictator’s legacy to a country still in formation as well as his legacy to Italians still trying to understand their role in the newly unified nation after the *Risorgimento*.

At the core of Fogu’s study is the construction of a fascist imaginary in its complex array of images and words. Museums, exhibitions, and archives are among the favourite sites of research Fogu deems appropriate for defining the connections between the politics of history and the construction of such a collective imaginary in which the visual played an extraordinary role. Fogu argues convincingly that Fascism, as a “historic agent” that conflates the concepts of history and historiography, appears reified in Giovanni Gentile’s theory of Fascism. Gentile’s reformulations of actualism constitute a theory that, according to Fogu, intellectualizes Mussolini’s sense of politics and history as encapsulated in the dictator’s famous motto: “Fascism makes history; it does not write it.”

This is an ambitious volume whose purpose is to tie Mussolini’s genuine interest in the arts to a higher ideology (in an intellectual sense). The Duce’s effort, joined in this by his entourage of intellectuals, was geared toward the pragmatic construction of a mentality that would bring conformity to the average Italian by utilizing some of the “higher” criteria for a more available system of ethics and aesthetics. With this in mind, a collective imaginary would be created for the Italian population, and this would happen regardless of geographical differences. Within such a horizon, Fascism would constitute the key to understanding the present.

In this text, fascist ideology is thus perceived as an indispensable tool for