

The Difference between Liberalism and Democracy: A Forgotten Italian Tradition¹

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Without Liberty you cannot fulfil any of your
duties. Where Liberty is missing, Justice,
Morality, Equality no longer have meaning
— Giuseppe Mazzini

This essay is a response to the return of the far right to government in Italy.

Its central contention is that Italy has traditionally lacked a liberal culture, with Fascism and Marxist communism always having been the prevailing currents of thought.

I will subsequently argue that the Italian political tradition must start anew from the minority of Italian liberal thinkers who have been fought against, marginalised, and eventually forgotten throughout its history: most notably, Benedetto Croce and Norberto Bobbio.

Commonplaces

Almost all laypeople, when — say on television — they hear the words ‘liberal’, ‘democratic’, ‘liberal democrat’, from politicians or journalists, cannot distinguish between them, or maybe even try, as if saying to themselves: ‘they are technical and cabalistic terms, the usual abracadabra used by the Experts! And if journalists and politicians — even them! — use these words with such ease and arbitrariness, what should I do myself? Should I improvise as a political philosopher ?!’

And so almost everyone confuses these words and takes them resignedly for synonyms, so that confusion becomes the norm, the norm becomes unconscious, unawareness spreads through contagion, and here we have what is called a commonplace.

Relying mainly on Norberto Bobbio’s book *Liberalismo and Democrazia*,² I want to present and distinguish clearly these old and ever-current concepts.

As we see in Bobbio’s texts, democracy is one of the three answers to the question, ‘who has sovereign power? That is, who commands in the state?’ ‘The Monarchy replies, “Only one!” Oligarchy answers, “Only some, only a few!” Democracy responds, “The majority, ‘the people’”!’

Liberalism, on the other hand, is one of two answers to another and different question, which is: ‘How is sovereignty exercised? That is: in what way do those who command in the state, command?’ ‘Absolutism³ answers: “Who commands, commands

¹ This article is in large part the English translation of the ‘Introduction’ to the new edition of Norberto Bobbio’s book, *Liberalismo e Democrazia (Liberalism and Democracy)* (Milano: Simonelli, 2006). I have shortened and modified that essay in several places.

² 2nd edition, Milano: Simonelli Editore, 2006.

³ Variations: Tyranny, Despotism, Authoritarianism, Dictatorship, Totalitarianism.

over everything, they have unlimited power!” Liberalism responds: “Who commands, commands only something and not everything, and has limited power!”

Liberalism is in fact a theory and a practice of the limitation of sovereign power, whoever the sovereign is: one, several, or the majority. Whoever is the sovereign, in a liberal state they cannot prevent the individual from professing the religion he wants, criticising the work of the government, demonstrating in the streets against the government, associating in parties that carry out a policy of opposition to the government and moving freely within the territory of the state or outside it. Neither, in a liberal state, can the government command its police to arrest a citizen: arrest and prosecution is the responsibility of a group of people – the Magistracy – independent of the government, because if the government were to arrest and prosecute the citizens, according to liberals it is always possible that the victims of this prosecution would be the political opponents of the government, rather than murderers, thieves or rapists.⁴

These two questions – ‘who is the sovereign?’ and ‘how do they rule?’ – are thus heterogeneous, and at the same time their answers have a long history as independent variables: for example, before the seventeenth century no states were either liberal or democratic (in fact, in ancient Athens, at the peak of its ‘democratic’ phase, the citizens entitled to vote ‘were probably no more than 30 percent of the total adult population’⁵). In the nineteenth century in Western Europe there were liberal but not democratic states, and today, in the same area, there are states both liberal and democratic. More disturbing – also because it more directly conflicts with the commonplace that confuses liberalism and democracy – from the nineteenth century onwards, across the world, including Europe, there existed and still exist states that are democratic but not liberal.⁶

This last phenomenon had been predicted by the liberal thinker Alexis de Tocqueville as early as 1840 and he had called it ‘the despotism of the majority’. Large and crushing majorities of citizens of a state can elect a despot who abrogates freedom of the press and dissolves the opposition parties, ordering the arrest and execution of opponents, and not only do they elect him in the first place but they continue to vote for him and support him in many ways with increasing enthusiasm. It is not easy to see such facts if the mind is clouded by the powerful commonplace according to which: ‘if an idea or an action is approved by the majority (of my family members, classmates, co-religionists, my national group, the “people”) then it is right’. And so, given that tyranny has for millennia been considered unjust, it seems impossible that there could be anything like a ‘tyranny of the majority’.

⁴ The fundamental liberties of Liberalism have been called by Bobbio, ‘the four great liberties of the moderns’: personal freedom (which includes guarantees during the penal process, the habeas corpus), freedom of expression of thought, freedom of movement, freedom of association.

⁵ J. Thorley, *Athenian Democracy*, London: Routledge, 2005, p. 74.

⁶ Which explains, among other things, how there could be a gap between a pure liberal state and a pure democratic state: a state in which the main civil rights were recognised, but suffrage was restricted, as happened for example in Italy until 1912, could be called liberal but not democratic; on the other hand, a state with universal suffrage can, using the same mechanisms of democracy, establish an illiberal regime, as happened in Germany in 1933, when Nazism seized power through democratic elections.

It is true that every individual is born and formed within and thanks to many affective, religious, political, and cultural communities: it is certainly not this undoubted fact that the liberal calls into question! The problem is that, for the liberal, the individual must not dismiss the freedom of judgement of his individual mind in the face of any community.⁷

We must also discuss the economic-social issue, that of so-called ‘class’. Regarding the Soviet Union, Bobbio – back in 1954 – recalled a phrase by Lenin (‘proletarian democracy is a thousand times more democratic than any bourgeois democracy’) and commented:

the problem is if, by affirming that the Soviet state is a democracy, one escapes the objection that it is a dictatorship [...] in the specific sense in which the dictatorship as a form of government distinguishes itself from a liberal regime. [...] And the contrast between the Soviet regime and the Western regimes is not a contrast between democracy and non-democracy, or between major and minor democracy, but between a dictatorial regime and a liberal regime. [...] One proof of this is the fact that the polemical phrase of Lenin, ‘Proletarian democracy is a thousand times more democratic than any bourgeois democracy’, which may sound excessive but is not contradictory, would sound false if we changed it to this: ‘proletarian democracy is a thousand times more liberal than any bourgeois democracy’.⁸

The commonplace according to which the majority cannot be wrong is always impregnated with moralism and emotional blackmail: is it not morally much more ‘noble’ to abandon one’s own ‘selfish’ individual judgment and give oneself over to the will of one’s own Family, Church, Motherland? Let’s listen to Saint Just, Robespierre’s right-hand man, the leader of the revolutionaries during the French Revolution:

The children belong to the mother up to five years, provided she has raised them; and then to the republic until death. One who declares that he does not believe in friendship must be banned. Every man of twenty-one must declare in the temple who his friends are; this declaration must be renewed every year, in the month of Ventose. If a man commits a crime, his friends are banned. If a man has no friends, he is banished.⁹

⁷ See Ermanno Vitale (preface by Michelangelo Bovero), *Liberalismo e multiculturalismo. Una sfida per il pensiero democratico (Liberalism and Multiculturalism. A Challenge for Democratic Thought)*, Bari: Laterza, 2000, pp. VII, VIII, 5, 97.

⁸ Norberto Bobbio, *Politica e Cultura (Politics and Culture)* (1955) (with an introduction by Franco Sbarberi), Torino: Einaudi, 2005, pp. 130–31.

⁹ Louis de Saint Just, *Frammenti sulle istituzioni repubblicane (Short Writings on Republican Institutions)*, Torino: Einaudi, 1975, pp. 213–16, cited in Ermanno Vitale, *Liberalismo...*, op. cit, p. 104.

Beyond these appeals to identitarian comradeship, classic liberals (like John Locke, Benjamin Constant, and John Stuart Mill) have always been suspicious of power and have therefore indicated how it should be controlled and limited. On the other hand, the various communitarian theories (religious, nationalist, fascist or communist) based on the central principle of democracy (the majority is right) did not have this suspicion. As Bobbio wrote: ‘The liberal doctrine makes the problem of the abuse of power the centre of its reflection, the communist doctrine generally ignores it’.¹⁰

Yes, power. As the famous sentence of a nineteenth-century liberal, Lord Acton claims: ‘Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely’.¹¹ And, at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, never have so many people realised this. Never as today have intellectuals studied and criticised, with a finally achieved disenchantment, all kinds of authoritarianism (fascist, communist, religious, populist), never before today have there been so many associations aimed at the defence of civil rights and the denunciation of their violation, never before today in defence of these civil rights have mass demonstrations and marches been so mobilised.

However, did *many* people really understand this? Certainly, those who do, remain a tiny minority, at least in my country, Italy, but certainly they are more than in previous historical periods.

Someone like Michael Mann even thinks that the ethnic cleansing and genocide of the twentieth century are direct effects of democracy and constitute its ‘dark side’.¹² Someone like Norberto Bobbio, however, even if he thought that he could not accept a democracy that had none of the inviolable rights proposed by liberalism, nonetheless he thought it ‘unlikely that an undemocratic state can guarantee fundamental freedoms’.¹³ It is true that nineteenth-century Britain was certainly oligarchic (in that only a small percentage of citizens had the right to vote), and it is true that it defended these fundamental rights very well and better than those states that were contemporaries and already had universal male suffrage (for instance, France). But it is also true that the dynamic process of this nineteenth-century Britain was constantly moving towards the enlargement of suffrage, as if to demonstrate – at least in the eyes of those who are inclined to support this thesis – that to continue to maintain and broaden the defence of

¹⁰ Appendix to *Politica and Cultura*, cit, p. 262, and on this point cf. the Introduction by Franco Sbarberi on pp. XL–XLI.

¹¹ Karl Popper wrote: ‘excessive political power leads to situations in which political errors can no longer be investigated. Even if we assume that those who have power are inspired by pure altruism (rather than by the intention to remain in power), their power will tend to prevent the search and critical correction of the error until it is no longer possible to do so’, ‘Introduzione all’edizione italiana’, *Miseria dello storicismo* (*The Poverty of Historicism*, 1944), Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997, p. 10.

¹² Michael Mann, *Il lato oscuro della democrazia* (*The Dark Side of Democracy*), Milan: Università Bocconi Editore, 2005, pp. IX, 2–4, 294, 584, 621.

¹³ Norberto Bobbio, *Il futuro della democrazia* (*The Future of Democracy*) (1984), Torino: Einaudi, 1995. pp. 6–7. See Ron Terchek, *Whose Realism? Whose Reality?* (essay on ‘democratic realism’ and Norberto Bobbio, prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Association, San Francisco, 2001, online, p. 20).

rights of freedom in an increasingly mass society (industrialised, urbanised and literate) it was necessary to control the actions of oligarchies by increasingly large layers of citizens.

In fact, if all the classical liberals of the last two centuries have understood the danger of the ‘tyranny of the majority’ in a ‘pure’ democracy, that is without liberalism, and therefore have escaped the idealisation of the ‘good people’, however, some of them, such as Mill, Croce, Popper and Bobbio, do not, as a consequence of this, weave a praise of Oligarchy, of the Illuminated Élites, of a New Aristocracy, perhaps no longer founded on blood and property but on culture. Indeed Bobbio notes how, after the lesson of Karl Popper, the liberal no longer used the metaphor – deriving from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment – of the ‘light’ that illuminates the ‘darkness’, but has used the metaphor of ‘openness’ as a situation opposed to ‘closure’: openness (towards a broader pluralism of ideas, people, decisions, situations) which, at least as a potentiality, appears to be greater in a democratic society than in an oligarchy.

That is, these liberal thinkers have recorded – as a negative example – the twentieth-century theoretical-rhetorical experiences and practices of those ‘racist aristocracies’, those ‘economic elites’, those ‘intellectual happy few’, those ‘avant-garde leaders of the revolution’, which, as the facts attested, were so bad for everyone.

For example: the aristocratism of the ‘intellectual happy few’! How many foolish mental myopias and moral distortions are derived from this idea and from this practice throughout the twentieth century! Martin Green and John Carey have written well-documented books about these topics,¹⁴ but how many more books should be written and disseminated so that we can finally get rid of this particular nineteenth-century topic! The case, recalled by Carey, of certain communist intellectuals is eloquent: their explicit elitism and their veiled contempt for ‘common people’ seem to highlight how any closed oligarchy degenerates, whatever the ideology professed.

A liberal, therefore, to escape from the widespread commonplace that idealises ‘the people’, must not fall into the – more hidden, but not so hidden – commonplace that idealises ‘the elite’. To be wary of the ‘tyranny of the majority’ does not at all mean defending and advising a ‘tyranny of the minority’.

However, we have experiences, a story to be pondered

As a political practice, liberalism was born out of the two English revolutions of the seventeenth century and thereafter spread steadily to other Western countries. This diffusion was punctuated by dramatic setbacks and reactions. For example, Benedetto Croce set down in his *History as the Story of Liberty* (1938) a moving and powerful account of the triumphs of nineteenth century liberalism, at a time when the reaction of fascism and communism against liberal institutions seemed, in the eyes of most Europeans, to decree the ignominious death of the liberal tradition in many of the countries where it had so thrived in the previous century. Croce nevertheless exhibited a strong faith that, despite the events of his own time, Liberty would not interrupt its steady

¹⁴ Martin Green, *Children of the Sun: a Narrative of ‘Decadence’ in England after 1918*, London: Constable, 1977; John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992), Chicago: Academy Chicago, 2002.

march forward throughout time, because it is the very engine of history. The nobility of this act of faith still moves and leaves in astonished admiration many who subscribe to the supreme value of political, religious and cultural freedom.

As Croce and Popper continually repeated, freedom does not exist without conflict: if the Conservative would like a society in which there was an idyllic concord of opinions and faiths, the Liberal knows that freedom exists only in plurality, in confrontation and contraposition of different and opposing ideas. This free confrontation and opposition is freedom itself. Another great European intellectual, the French Jew Marc Bloch, wrote just after the crushing defeat that the French nation suffered in 1940 that, '[i]t is right that in a free country adverse social philosophies can fight freely [...]. The misfortune of the homeland begins when one does not understand the legitimacy of these conflicts'.¹⁵

The legacy of English constitutional development is that the rights of citizens had been sought and obtained beforehand, and only afterwards had electoral suffrage been gradually enlarged in order to better defend these rights. In other national histories, such as that of France, matters have been rather more confused, and the 'broader' majorities of democracy have often been seen as sources of rights and justice, and not just as a method for the effective control of these rights, perhaps a better method than the one which gave control to the monarch and to the hereditary oligarchy, as in the Middle Ages, or to an oligarchy elected by restricted suffrage, as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it is ultimately only a control method and not a source of liberty itself.

In the history of the United States this confusion – which may be called 'populist' – was less pronounced than in France, but more so than in England. Such ideas were entrenched in American political culture from before independence: an interesting book by Claes Ryn, *America the Virtuous* (2004), shows how the Jacobin idea of the 'virtuous people' as a source of justice was already present in Thomas Jefferson's thought, and indeed, this idea has traversed the centuries, colouring even the events of our own times, a revolutionary and Jacobin idea that today, perhaps ironically, is passed over by certain liberals as a conservative or 'neo-conservative' contention.¹⁶

It must be added, however, that the role played by the United States in the establishment and defence of freedom in the West has been great and irreplaceable. The Americans Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt – despite strong illiberal and even anti-liberal strains in American political discourse – virtually saved freedom in Europe through their interventions in the two World Wars. Moreover, if we read Roosevelt's speeches at the crucial moments of the war, those Marxists who are used to confusing the concept of 'liberalism' with the concept of 'capitalism' may be surprised at

¹⁵ Marc Bloch, *Una strana sconfitta (A Strange Defeat)* (1940), Torino: Einaudi, 1995, p. 147.

¹⁶ Claes Ryn, *America the Virtuous*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2004, especially pp. 1-5, 8, 20-23, 32-34, 50, 56, 65-67, 71-74, 77-79, 91, 106, 123-28, 137, 140, 157, 189, 201-207. Claes Ryn remains one of the world's leading scholars of Benedetto Croce.

how closely the struggle against Nazi-fascist tyranny was for Roosevelt connected with the social promotion of the most disadvantaged classes among his fellow citizens.¹⁷

In Italy the populist confusion was more severe than in France, which in the end did not succumb to government by either the extreme left or the far-right, as Italy did, coming under a regime that, in the name of the 'will of the people', crushed most legal rights and individual freedoms, all the while maintaining universal suffrage.

A large majority of the Italian intellectuals of the same period had been more or less enthusiastic supporters of the late fascist regime.¹⁸ It must be noted that within Italian fascism there existed a 'right' and a 'left': for example, the publicist Giovanni Preziosi and the staff of his magazine *La Vita Italiana* represented the fascist right insofar as they shunned a liberal approach to rights and social freedoms while in turn embracing economic liberalism (or 'liberism'; in Italian there exist two distinct terms: '*liberalismo*' – analogous to political liberalism, and '*liberismo*' – analogous to free-market ideology); while the philosopher Giovanni Gentile and his followers represented the fascist left because, in their opposition to liberalism they also rejected free markets as the alleged cause of unequal social conditions among the Italian citizenry.¹⁹

This 'left' ideology was both anti-liberal and anti-liberist and in some ways continued in the post-Marxist-inspired left, not only in the 1950s Italian Communist Party, but also in a significant part of the 1968 movement: anti-liberalism and anti-liberism (for which read: anti-capitalism) were associated or even synonymous in the thought of those generations who supported Stalin, Mao, Lenin, Fidel Castro and Chavez.²⁰

Benedetto Croce and Norberto Bobbio

Diametrically opposed to the position of the anti-liberal and fascist right was Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) who in the 1930s attempted to prove to Luigi Einaudi, a liberal and 'liberist' (which is to say a supporter of free-market theory) that a liberal state could adopt an economic policy contrary to the free-market's dogmas in certain periods, and indeed

¹⁷ See, for example, Roosevelt's speeches, Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 6th 1941, Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 11th 1944, Campaign Address at Soldiers' Field, Chicago, Illinois, October 28th 1944 (online at the Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt Institute website).

¹⁸ See the recent book by Mirella Serri, *I Redenti (The Redeemed)*, Milano: Il Corbaccio, 2005.

¹⁹ Giovanni Preziosi, Ugo Spirito, in *La Vita Italiana*, 1932, n° 5; See Franco Manni, *I presupposti filosofici della 'Vita Italiana' di Giovanni Preziosi (The Philosophical Assumptions in 'La Vita Italiana' by Giovanni Preziosi)*, in Aa. Vv. (edited by Luigi Parente and Fabio Gentile), *Giovanni Preziosi e la questione della razza in Italia (Giovanni Preziosi and the Issue of Race in Italy)*, Cosenza: Rubbettino, 2005.

²⁰ In 1981, Bobbio wrote in *The Future of Democracy*, pp. 116–19 that he was 'surprised' that in a series on the Left, the classic *On Liberty* by J.S. Mill had been reprinted, even if this publication had unleashed leftist comments that were 'annoyed, perplexed, even strongly critical'. Fifteen years later, Bobbio wrote: 'I found myself in this phrase of Améry: "When the old man realises that the Marxist, certainly and not wrongly by him considered a champion of the rationalist army, now recognised in some ways in Heidegger, the spirit of the era must appear to him misguided, indeed authentically dissociated: the philosophical mathematics of his era is transformed into a magic square"', Norberto Bobbio, *De senectute (On Old Age)*, Torino: Einaudi, 1996, pp. 21–22.

must do so in order to remain liberal.²¹ But Croce was also opposed to the position – let us call it the ‘social right’ – of Gentile, who despised both liberalism and ‘liberism’ as anti-fascist ideas.

Benedetto Croce was a giant of the Italian intellectual landscape: for long decades, with persuasive force, he showed both the Italian and the European public the theoretical and practical errors of Marxism, communism, racialism, nationalism, fascism, decadence, positivism and Catholic fundamentalism. Towards the end of his life – when Italy was ‘split in two’ between the Kingdom aligned with the Allies in the South and the Italian Social Republic in the Centre-North – he also took on a direct and central political role; for some months he was the most influential Italian politician, more so than De Gasperi, more than Togliatti, more than Badoglio, more than the Lieutenant of the Kingdom, more even than the King himself.²²

But Croce died in 1952, practically ignored and allegedly overtaken by a gradually increasing number of supposedly more progressive intellectuals. First he was fought against, and then simply forgotten.²³ Paradoxically, the best scholars of Croce from recent times are two non-Italians: the Americans David D. Roberts and Claes G. Ryn.²⁴

But Croce had an heir, at least in the field of political and ethical studies, namely Norberto Bobbio.²⁵ Bobbio has written many books and articles, often for specialists, but his first influential and successful book, aimed at a cultured but non-specialist audience, was *Politics and Culture* (1955): the very date of the book marks a willingness to resume the discourse of the Neapolitan philosopher now deceased. The content, in addition to

²¹ Benedetto Croce and Luigi Einaudi, *Liberalism and Liberism* (1952), Napoli: Ricciardi, 1988. For an intelligent, informed, clear and updated study on this topic see Daniele Besomi and Giorgio Rampa, *Dal liberalismo al liberismo. Stato e mercato nella storia delle idee e nella analisi degli economisti (From Liberalism to Liberism. State and Market in the History of Ideas and in the Analysis of Economists)*, Torino: Giappichelli, 2000.

²² This story has always been known by few. His *Taccuini di Guerra 1943-1945 (War Notebooks 1943-1945)*, Milano: Adelphi, 2004, show in great detail the following astounding thing: that a scholar, unwillingly and purely out of civic duty, found himself – with concrete results – at the centre of the political scene in a State of not inconsiderable size, and – even more amazingly, especially on our shores – with modesty and an absolute personal disinterest. But these notebooks, at least up until now, have been practically ignored by our cultural debate and have by no means begun to enter into the shared ‘canon’ of our collective memory, neither among people of average culture nor among intellectuals.

²³ I was born in 1959 and in my youth – at the end of the seventies and during the eighties – I realised that I could not find any peers who had read Croce; perhaps they spoke of him by hearsay and then only briefly, and exclusively in order to pass devaluing judgements upon him and his work.

²⁴ David D. Roberts: *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987; and also *Nothing But History: Reconstruction and Extremity After Metaphysics*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995. Claes G. Ryn: *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*, New Brunswick: Transaction, 1997; and also *A Common Human Ground. Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World*, Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003.

²⁵ Norberto Bobbio, from Turin (1909–2004), was for a long time an inspiration for university students, as a lecturer, first in the philosophy of law and then in political philosophy. And he enjoyed an even longer period of indirect teaching as the author of books, essays for journals, articles and interviews for newspapers. His works have been translated into nineteen languages.

explicitly dedicating two of the chapters to Croce, incorporates Croce's themes of liberalism and non-enslavement of culture to party politics. Bobbio takes up Croce's standard not so much in his penultimate intellectual battle against fascism, but against the communist thought which became so influential in Italy following the War. This book by Bobbio splendidly contends for liberalism against the Italian Communists who then opposed it.

Of all Croce's theoretical and practical battles, only one has not been carried forward by Bobbio: Croce's opposition to Positivism (this fact explains – together with others – the much more analytical approach that Bobbio takes in comparison with Croce in the treatment of philosophical problems).

Both thinkers, having each enjoyed a long and industrious life, have been able, almost as 'watchmen of Israel',²⁶ to observe and watch over a multiplicity of phases in Italian cultural and political history. Bobbio began to publish in 1934 and continued for seventy years! One a Senator of the Kingdom of Italy and the other a Senator for life of the Italian Republic, both awarded many academic and civil honours, with their works appreciated by many scholars abroad, both Croce and Bobbio built and then maintained for their entire lives a 'democratic', which is to say 'easy-going' character: non-narcissistic, sociable, approachable and welcoming to anyone who wanted to meet them: even if their interlocutor was a comparative 'nobody', they treated him as an equal.²⁷

Bobbio recalled that as a child he had felt a strong feeling of injustice when he went on holiday in the countryside and, scion of the 'good' Turin bourgeoisie, used to play with peasant children: these playmates, however, had behind them a life without any of the privileges of class accorded to him. They were poor, shabbily dressed, and undernourished; every summer he discovered that one of them had died during the winter of tuberculosis. Hence, for Bobbio, 'the fundamental reason' for his addressing political questions was 'the discomfort of the spectacle of enormous inequalities, as disproportionate as they were unjustified, between rich and poor, between those who are at the top and those who are at the bottom of the social ladder'.²⁸

The opinion of the two philosophers when it came to democracy was in certain respects different: Croce was somewhat distrustful towards it, whilst Bobbio held it in higher esteem. But both of them saw a theoretical error – fraught with negative practical consequences – in so-called 'egalitarianism'. Croce wrote in *History as the Story of Liberty* (1932):

Liberalism had detached itself from democracy, which, in its extreme form of Jacobism, blindly pursuing its abstractions, had not only destroyed the living and

²⁶ Ezek 3:17, 'Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore hear a word from My mouth, and give them warning from Me'.

²⁷ When it comes to Croce I have only read the testimonies of others, whereas with Bobbio I have read the testimonies of others but also – for twenty years – I was able to experience his character in person.

²⁸ Norberto Bobbio, *Destra e sinistra (Right and Left)*, Roma: Donzelli Editore, 1995, pp. 128–29.

physiological tissues of the social body, but, exchanging the people for a part and with a single manifestation (that is, the less civilised of the people, the unstructured, shouting and impulsive crowd), and exercising tyranny in the name of the People, had gone to the other extreme, and, in place of equality and freedom, had opened the way to equal servitude and dictatorship.²⁹

And Bobbio, in one of his last interviews, said:

Egalitarianism is a philosophical conception that leads to the world of bees, to the emptying of individuality [...]. This level and this depersonalisation are then the appropriate terrain for the birth of political totalitarianism. [...] It is necessary to distinguish egalitarianism from equalisation. Egalitarianism is a philosophical conception and it is also an attempt carried out in the states where communism has attained power, a conception and attempt which counteract the independence and peculiarities of the individual within the society. [...] Equalisation on the other hand is a tendency and a movement towards the reduction of economic differences between individuals and social groups.³⁰

The opposition of Croce and Bobbio to illiberal conceptions of all kinds, even though they were often over-subtle and cloaked in pseudo-morality, their insensitivity to intellectual fashions, political winds, the ‘forces of Destiny’ and the ‘inescapable urgencies of History’, led them to oppose both Marxism and fascist ideology, and this in a country like Italy where a typical attitude of many intellectuals throughout the twentieth century was to swing between opposing extremisms, whilst always remaining illiberal. Thus, both philosophers were attacked vituperatively for many years from both the extreme left and the extreme right.³¹

The two thinkers had come into contact – at different points in history – with both theoretical Marxism and the multifaceted movement of political socialism. Croce and Bobbio had sharply criticised both of them, but they had also grasped the good aspects of both the theory and the political practice. Croce reproached Einaudi for not seeing that liberalism could very well agree with a socialist economic policy, and, when he found himself president of the Italian Liberal Party, after a meeting with the socialist

²⁹ Benedetto Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono (History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century)*, Bari: Laterza, 1932, p. 32.

³⁰ *Il filosofo e i comunisti (The Philosopher and the Communists)* (Interview with Norberto Bobbio), *Diario*, 4 May 2001, p. 27. See also Bobbio, *Libertà ed eguaglianza (Freedom and Equality)*, Torino: Einaudi, 1995, pp. 30–41

³¹ As Karl Popper wrote in the epigraph to his book, from the time of the Second World War (*Poverty of Historicism*, p.13): ‘In memory of the countless men, women and children of all beliefs, nations and races that fell victim to the Fascist and Communist faith in the Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny’. A text by Bobbio that summarises with great clarity the theoretical terms of the relationship between liberalism and fascism, on the one hand, and between liberalism and communism on the other, is ‘Augusto del Noce: Fascism, Liberalism, Communism’ (*Il Ponte*, XLIX, n° 6, June 1993).

Giuseppe Saragat he wrote: '[Saragat] wants to preserve for socialism its character and its history, which is essentially liberal'.³²

Bobbio, already a follower of the 'Partito d'Azione' (Action Party), had, over the decades, studied and supported the liberal-socialist idea. If one looks to the classics of liberal thought, Croce and Bobbio were closer to the liberalism of Mill, Keynes and Popper than to that of Locke and Tocqueville in that they were in favour of the intervention of the state in the economy, and also the state's duty to improve the conditions of the more disadvantaged social classes.³³

In fact, even in the midst of all the uncertainties and ambiguities, the various Christian and Social Democrats, Labour, the Gaullists and Liberals of Western Europe after the Second World War have, so far at least, produced regimes in which the 'four great liberties of the moderns' are protected, but in which – along with this – the state also makes extensive legislative interventions into the economy: to defend workers' rights, provide public utility services, defend free competition, preserve the environment, and to subsidise the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups, so that in general in the European Union today we can see much liberalism and very little liberism; a situation in which the liberal state actively takes charge of the 'welfare' of its citizens. Liberalism? Social Democracy? Indeed! In any case, it is something that, in an apparent paradox, is disliked by both a certain radical left and a certain radical right, as Bobbio observed in 1981.³⁴

This situation certainly appeared to Bobbio as paradoxical: he had not previously supported 'left' criticism and afterwards did not support 'right' criticism. Bobbio perceived that Croce had first long been attacked and mocked by the fascists and then – after the fall of fascism – by the Marxists, who 'meanly' or 'ungenerously' labelled him the 'precursor of fascism', 'reactionary', and 'pro-fascist'; he, Benedetto Croce, who was '[t]he moral conscience of Italian anti-Fascism [...]. His defence of liberalism, pursued tirelessly until his last years, was the defence of the ideal of freedom that is identified with the moral conscience'.³⁵

This is not to say that Bobbio was wholly uncritical of the liberalism of Croce; his critique may be found in the detailed and masterly analysis, 'Benedetto Croce and Liberalism', where he writes:

I immediately say that, in spite of the many doubts I feel I should raise about the theory of liberalism advanced by Benedetto Croce, I have no intention

³² B. Croce, *Taccuini*, p. 350

³³ 'I believe that a competitive economy is more efficient than a planned economy, but I did not believe that this was a decisive argument against the central planning of the economy: if such a planning could produce a freer and more human society, or simply a society that was more just than a competitive society, I would patronise it even if planning was less efficient than competition. It is my opinion, in fact, that we should be ready to pay a high price for freedom', Karl Popper, *Poverty of Historicism*, p. 9

³⁴ Norberto Bobbio, *Il futuro della democrazia (The Future of Democracy)*, Torino: Einaudi, 1995, p. 129.

³⁵ See Norberto Bobbio, *Politica e Cultura*, pp. 186, 192, 200, 202.

of diminishing the liberal function that his thought and personality had in the years of Fascist domination. There are some who, out of hatred for liberalism or hatred for Croce, would like to disavow the merits and practical value of the anti-fascist position of the author of the *History as the Story of Liberty*. Anyone who participated in the anxieties and hopes of those years, I am speaking of intellectuals, cannot forget that the main road to converting the uncertain to antifascism was to make the books of Croce read and discussed, that most of the young intellectuals came to antifascism through Croce, and those who had already arrived or had always been there, were drawing comfort from knowing that Croce, the highest and most illustrious representative of Italian culture, had not bowed to dictatorship. Every criticism of Croce's attitude during fascism is acrimonious and malevolent polemics. As such it does not deserve discussion.³⁶

Most of the chapters that make up the book, *Politics and Culture* were written by Bobbio between 1951 and 1954: the years of McCarthyism and the twilight of Stalinism! If this was the atmosphere in which the ideals of liberalism had to flourish within the two victorious superpowers of the Second World War – a war waged by them against Hitler in the name of freedom – we can understand the militant urgency that Bobbio then felt in polemicising against those intellectuals and Italian politicians who attacked liberalism. These were communists, and specifically Italian communists possessing a rigidly Stalinist ideology, not yet softened by the denunciations of Stalin's crimes by Nikita Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

We must observe that, while there was only one example of fascism and Nazism, communism had two iterations: the tyrannical and genocidal example of the USSR, China, Cambodia; whereas these dreadful excesses were absent in the communism of Italy, Western Europe and the Anglosphere. Nevertheless, Bobbio – who had certainly not dialogued with Stalin, Beria, Mao or Pol Pot – recognised the importance of cultivating good personal relationships with at least some Italian communists, such as Giorgio Napolitano, Aldo Tortorella, Gian Carlo Pajetta and Pietro Ingrao.³⁷

Croce's attitude was similar: while he had never participated in a fascist government – even if he had been requested to do so – he co-operated in government with the Italian communists during the post-war period, and at a meeting of the Council of Ministers he publicly recalled to Togliatti his regret at the death of the communist Antonio Gramsci, his affection for the communist Giorgio Amendola, and the help he had given at the height of fascist rule to a Neapolitan communist leader to publish a book by Antonio Labriola.³⁸

For Bobbio, communism had indicated real and important problems:

³⁶ *Politica e Cultura*, pp. 177–228, 202: the main message is this: Croce, liberal in ideals and human sensitivity, was however indifferent, on a more directly political level, to concrete legal forms that limit the power of government: for example, the division of powers.

³⁷ *Il filosofo e i comunisti*, p. 26

³⁸ *Taccuini*, pp. 403, 289.

Communism was an ‘inverted utopia’, because it was a liberation utopia that had been inverted into its opposite, namely the constriction and oppression of human beings [...]. That historical communism has failed, I do not dispute. But the problems remain, the very same problems that the communist utopia had pointed out and believed to be soluble. This is the reason why it is foolish to rejoice in their defeat and, rubbing one’s hands with glee, to say: ‘We told you so!’. Oh, you deluded people! Do you really believe that the end of historical communism (I insist on the ‘historical’) has put an end to the need and thirst for justice?³⁹

Much work to be done

The memory of these doctrines of Benedetto Croce and Norberto Bobbio, together with the memory of the profound intellectual legacy that Bobbio inherited from Croce, have been erased from Italian culture by both older communists like Palmiro Togliatti from 1944 onwards and by the Neo-Marxists of 1968 right up to today.⁴⁰

After this ‘*damnatio memoriae*’ this link between Bobbio and Croce was simply forgotten and with it those of their doctrines which could have made Italian democracy more resistant to populism and other forms of mass manipulation.

In fact, the role of ‘*studia humanitatis*’ is essential to any country’s society and politics: humanities must most of all avoid falsification and notably that kind of falsification which is purposeful omission. There is a huge amount of work to be done in this regard in relation to Italian culture and its historical self-representation. In my opinion, the first step should be to become aware that Bobbio affirmed many times that Croce was his most significant mentor and teacher (above all the others, Cattaneo, Kelsen, Hobbes, Hegel, Marx), and to confute the mass of published writings that have denied or ignored this fact for decades.

The second step would then be to provide an overview of the history of Italian culture, to collect data and tell the story of how, for more than a century, the philosophy

³⁹ *Il filosofo e i comunisti*, pp. 26–27.

⁴⁰ Togliatti (head of the Italian Communist Party) launched an appeal to the intellectual community to build an ‘anti-Croce’ culture. He had already started when Croce was still alive, but had partly failed. One should read the story told by Croce himself, of public attacks (along with public and almost forced retractions) by Togliatti who accused him of ‘collaborationism’ with the fascist regime in *Taccuini*, pp. 162–63, 258, 402–404. On Togliatti and his anti-Croce campaign, see Daniela la Penna, ‘The rise and fall of Benedetto Croce. Intellectual positionings in the Italian cultural field, 1944–1947’, *Modern Italy*, Volume 21, Issue 2, May 2016, pp. 139–55. On 1968 Neo-Marxists, see Marco Revelli’s book, *Bobbio e il suo mondo (Bobbio and his World)*, Torino: Aragno, 2006, where the name of Benedetto Croce is never mentioned. On the way in which 1968 intellectuals hid the paramount intellectual connections between Bobbio and Croce, see Franco Manni, ‘Benedetto Croce e Norberto Bobbio’ in Ivan Pozzoni (ed.), *Benedetto Croce. Teoria e Orizzonti (Theory and Horizons)*, Milano: Limina Mentis, 2010, p. 275, and, by the same author, *Il Croce di Norberto Bobbio*, ‘Reset’, March–April 2010, Issue 118, pp. 79–84.

of liberalism, on the one hand, had a consistent and intellectually elevated tradition, but, on the other hand, was repeatedly challenged and defeated by Marxism and fascism.

The third step should be to disseminate such ideas among the Italian public, hoping that the changed circumstances of today will allow a more thoughtful reception of them.