

# Bobbio and Croce – Which Liberalism?

FRANCO SBARBERI

*Abstract: Benedetto Croce taught Norberto Bobbio to distinguish between two kinds of commitment, namely an intellectual and a political one. The expression “politica della cultura” effectively translates the idea of the autonomy or independence of scholarly and intellectual research. Another idea which was passed on from Croce to Bobbio is that of liberalism as the theoretical basis of every form of civil government insofar as the liberal conception rejects any notion of “Providence” as a covert agent of history. But Bobbio differed from Croce since he never believed that democracy could essentially contradict the perspective of liberalism, and was convinced that true emancipation is a sort of “conguagliamento delle libertà,” or, in other words, that it implies a strong relation between individual political rights and the demands of social justice.*

In the *Preface* to a bibliography of his writings that was published in 1984, Bobbio made reference to a “half-score” of his preferred authors. For the early modern period the selection seemed “almost inevitable” as far as the names of Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Hegel were concerned. For more contemporary authors, on the other hand, he specifically singled out Croce, Cattaneo, Kelsen, Pareto, and Weber since they all represented, at one point or another, a crucial point of reference either for his own political development or for the considerable range of his intellectual interests (which also show him to have been a subtle analyst and systematic interpreter of the classic writers). He offers the following explanation for this choice of authors:

From Croce, the master of a generation that had repudiated fascism, I learnt once and for all to distinguish the commitment of the scholar from any directly political commitment. Cattaneo emphatically saved me from being imprisoned by the sterile philosophical abstractions in which young minds so often become entangled. Pareto, iconoclast and passionate skeptic that he was, helped me to understand both the limits of reason and the limitless world of human folly. Kelsen provided me with a ready opportunity to access a complete system of key concepts for a realistic (non-ideological) understanding of the concept of right that was distinct from its social basis and from the values that from time to time inspire it. And Weber, finally, has decisively helped me in recent years to rethink and reformulate the principle categories of politics.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C.Violi (ed.), *Norberto Bobbio. 50 anni di studi. Bibliografia degli scritti 1934-1983*, Milan: Angeli, 1984, pp. 14–15.

As we can see, the choice of Croce as a “master” derives principally from the firmness with which he defended the autonomy of culture during the central years of Mussolini’s dictatorship. But we may also add, more generally, that Croce was one of the favored classic authors by whom Bobbio was willing to be “contaminated” not only because he had been the standard bearer of the “politics of culture” but for other important reasons too: for the perceptive way in which he had castigated Gentile’s worship of the State, for his secular ethics that was as hostile to Catholic traditionalism as it was to the irrationalist currents in the culture of the time, for his “ethico-political” approach to historical events, for the idea that philosophy represents the methodological dimension of historiography, for his distinct preference for addressing specific and concrete problems, for his insistence that genuine reflection is the “antithesis of academic philosophy,” of the abstract and pretentious “philosophy of the professors.” In short and above all: Croce was a “master of moral political life” because he represented an inescapable point of reference not only in opposition to the simplifications and arrogant claims of fascism, but also to the “seductive temptations of the communist world.” What Croce essentially bequeathed to Bobbio, over a considerable period of time, was

[...] the conviction [...] of the superiority of liberalism over every other political doctrine, liberalism being understood here as the foundation of any form of civil order, as the necessary but not sufficient condition of any democratic form of government, and, in broader terms, as a general perspective on history.<sup>2</sup>

This history is a

[...] product of human effort, has no pre-established end or purpose, and thus refuses to allow the well-meaning interpreter either to indulge in the utopian dream of finally resolving the riddle of history or to yield in terror to the incubus of inevitable catastrophe.<sup>3</sup>

As we shall see, the acknowledgement that Croce had regarded liberalism both as “the foundation of any form of civil order” and as an anti-providentialist theory of history meant that Bobbio could accept the basic starting point of the argument without endorsing the idealist consequences and conclusions that Croce drew from it.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> N. Bobbio, “Il nostro Croce” (1991), in Id., *Dal fascismo alla democrazia. I regimi, le ideologie, le figure e le culture politiche*, (ed. M. Bovero), Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1997, pp. 233–234; for this remark, p. 219.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Over recent years there has been a lively and continuous growth of interest in Croce’s political philosophy and his numerous public interventions during the first half of the last century. In this

And long before this, Piero Gobetti and Gaetano Salvemini, who effectively represented the radical wing of liberal and democratic politics respectively, had also come to the conclusion that Croce had played a decisive role during the fascist years. Obviously Gobetti was never able to read Croce's history of Italy and his history of Europe, or his book *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (translated into English in 1941 under the title *History as the story of liberty*), all works that were written in the decade between 1928 and 1938. Yet in an essay that appeared in the journal *Rivoluzione liberale* in 1925, Gobetti could already describe Croce as a great European thinker who had begun, with clear determination and without rhetorical flourishes, a fundamental intellectual and political struggle against a regime that was bent on the destruction of freedom. And this, according to Gobetti, was the real difference between Croce and Gentile since the latter always remained "dogmatic, authoritarian, and a dictator of typically provincial infallibility." Thus starting from the idea that the domain of politics is the expression of the category of "utility," but also requires an effective conception of legality, Croce had concluded that the State exercises "force only insofar as it represents consensus," and that this force should never be understood not as pure violence, but as discerning justice, as "mildness no less than as severity."<sup>5</sup>

Considered as a whole, Gobetti identifies three elements in Croce's anti-fascist perspective: 1. the reaction of a liberal moderate who pursues "his own ideal version of a Giolittian politics" that is typically oriented to specific interventions and characterized by an aversion to sectarianism and fanaticism; 2. the rebellion of a cultured European who wishes to work for the future on the basis of his own intellectual autonomy in the awareness that the victory over fascism is "not a matter of squads or militias, but of confidence in our own intransigence and capacity to resist"; 3. the equanimity of the fighter who is conscious not only of his own limits, but also of the fact that the unremitting polemic against authoritarianism is "a necessary condition

connection I would refer to the following contributions: G. Bedeschi, *La fabbrica delle ideologie. Il pensiero politico nell'Italia del Novecento*, Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2002; S. Cingari, *Benedetto Croce e la crisi della civiltà europea*, II, Soveria Manelli: Rubbettino, 2003; M. Reale (ed.), *Croce filosofo liberale*, Pola: Luiss University Press, 2004; C. Ocone, *Benedetto Croce. Il liberalismo come concezione della vita*, with a "Preface" by V. Zanone, Soveria Manelli: Rubbettino, 2005; G. Sasso, *Filosofia e idealismo*, V, *Secondi paralipomena*, Naples: Bibliopolis, 2007; L. Gersi, *Croce e Salvemini. Uno storico conflitto ideale ripensato nell'Italia odierna*, Rome: Bibliosofica, 2007; C. A. Viano, *Stagioni filosofiche*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2007; F. Grassi Orsini and G. Nicolosi (eds.), *I liberali italiani dall'antifascismo alla Repubblica*, I, Soveria Manelli: Rubbettino, 2008. F. Mani was kind enough to allow me to consult his essay "Norberto Bobbio e Benedetto Croce," which is to appear in a collection of essays published by Limina mentis Editore.

<sup>5</sup> P. Gobetti, "Croce oppositore," in Id., *Scritti politici*, Turin: Einaudi, 1997, p. 876.

of liberation because no one can renounce his obligations” in this respect.<sup>6</sup> And Gobetti concludes:

The man of letters and of knowledge will seek to dispel the shadows of the new Medievalism and continue to work as if he actually lived in civil world [...] We recognize Croce as a genuine master and teacher precisely on account of this imperturbable non-conformist mentality.<sup>7</sup>

If in the mid 1920s Gobetti had clearly appreciated the example of liberty and civil commitment that Croce was able to provide during the period of fascist rule in Italy, in the immediate period after the end of the Second World War, none other than Gaetano Salvemini – even though he ascribed a conservative version of liberalism and a rather “disembodied” conception of freedom to Croce – could describe in equally incisive terms the important role that was played between 1925 and 1943 by the man who founded the journal *La Critica*:

Every other voice in Italy had been stifled by imprisonment, house arrest, or enforced exile. His very silence was effectively a protest. It is quite true that this resistance and this silence came from the rarefied intellectual heights, but its effect was powerful nonetheless. Many of the younger generation were encouraged by his teaching and his example to believe in freedom, even if they all understood the idea of freedom in their own way and in forms that Croce himself did not approve. But what mattered was that this freedom was *not* fascism.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, Croce broke his silence on many occasions, both in his writings and in his speeches in Parliament. From 1925 onwards, as Bobbio points out in his book *Politics and Culture*, the position Croce later developed was “no longer that of the intellectual specialist who undertakes to clarify concepts, nor that of the devotee of truth, but that of the philosopher as the defender of freedom” who calls upon educated and cultivated individuals to assume their political responsibilities, even “if this was a politics of culture, a politics of the long term distinct from politics in the ordinary everyday sense.”<sup>9</sup> As we have already indicated, the decade between 1928 and 1938 saw the publication of some of Croce’s most important historical works, but his most significant contributions, in the immediately political context, were represented by his direct and quite specific interventions. When he accused fascist intellectu-

<sup>6</sup> P. Gobetti, “Croce oppositore,” pp. 876–881.

<sup>7</sup> P. Gobetti, “Croce oppositore,” p. 881.

<sup>8</sup> G. Salvemini, “Che cosa è un liberale italiano nel 1946,” in Id., *Scritti sul fascismo*, III, ed. R. Vivarelli, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974, pp. 369 and 362.

<sup>9</sup> N. Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, ed. F. Sbarberi, Turin: Einaudi, 2005, pp. 91 and 94.

als of producing “doctrinal confusions and incoherent arguments” that only served to “contaminate” the realm of literature and the sciences with political interests and considerations, and to justify the growing violence of the fascist squads and the suppression of the freedom of the press, this had an immediate effect and was openly endorsed by hundreds of teachers, journalists, and artists. For as citizens they claimed the freedom to profess whatever political conception they wished, and as intellectuals they recognized “the sole duty of attempting, through the work of research and critical investigation, and through the creations of the arts, to elevate all individuals and all parties without distinction to a higher spiritual plane.”<sup>10</sup>

Croce also vigorously attacked the committee of “the Great and the Good” who were charged in 1925 with recommending the constitutional reform of the Italian state, as well as the innumerable “journals and would-be journals” that extolled the new regime. As a member of the Senate, he also voted against the law that limited freedom of the press, the special tribunals, the proposal to introduce the death penalty, the suppression of freedom of association. In 1929, on behalf of Albertini and Ruffini, he specifically opposed the Concordat which contravened the principle of religious freedom as well as the idea of the separation of Church and State, a fundamental issue for the liberal class of the *Risorgimento* period.<sup>11</sup> And in the later 1930s, finally, when the Hitler regime intensified its persecution of the Jews, Croce repeatedly attacked the wretched Nazi apologists for the “zoological concept of race” who had betrayed the cultural European tradition of Fichte and Hegel, of Schiller and Goethe, and issued timely warnings about the anti-semitic campaign that Mussolini was already hatching before a public in thrall to “a kind of resignation that amounted to passivity and indifference.”<sup>12</sup> In a bitter observation that was made only a few months before the Liberation, Croce nonetheless indicates that the capacity of individuals for resistance can also survive in the most adverse political conditions and thus, in a way reminiscent of Vico, even transform misfortunes into opportunities. As Croce pointed out:

My life under fascism was constantly pervaded by a recurrent pain of a public nature, by a sense of unease and insecurity, by the incubus of ruin and destruc-

<sup>10</sup> B. Croce, “Il manifesto degli intellettuali italiani antifascisti,” In Id., *Filosofia. Poesia. Storia*, p. 1057.

<sup>11</sup> See the text of Croce’s intervention in the Senate in the sitting of 24 May 1929 opposing ratification of the Treaty and Concordat between the Holy See and the Italian State, in B. Croce, *Discorsi parlamentari*, with an introductory essay by M. Maggi, Bologna: il Mulino, 2002, pp. 173–177.

<sup>12</sup> B. Croce, “Al rettore Giulio Hammer-Stockholm,” in Id., *Pagine sparse*, II, Bari: Laterza, 1960, pp. 527–528.

tion, and from that moment onwards I lost the trust which I once greeted each new day, that openness to the world and the search for new sources of delight, the joy with which I would experience such things. Yet, for all that, my mental vitality was heightened rather than diminished.<sup>13</sup>

Croce's firm response to the most serious measures and interventions of the regime exercised a profound effect upon the third generation of his students and followers that were educated during the 1920s and 30s, and in particular upon intellectuals such as Calogero and Capitini, Leone Ginzburg and Franco Venturi, Calamandrei and Bobbio himself. They all endorsed the idea that history is the story of freedom as "a hope, a challenge, and a prophecy."<sup>14</sup> But they could not understand, as Calogero wrote,

[...] that element of old historicism – part Vico, part Hegel, part Marx – which enabled Croce to perceive a providential epiphany in whatever happened, something which only made it easier for the indolent and the fearful to accept every accomplished fact that it would have been inconvenient to oppose.<sup>15</sup>

Above all, they did not endorse a reluctance to work for "different forms of human liberation" – something to which the socialist tradition, on the other hand, was particularly receptive. True emancipation, in fact, could not be exhausted by some supposedly innate human freedom that can never ultimately be infringed, but consisted in an "equalizing of freedoms" facilitated by a strong connection between civil and political rights and social justice.

As we know, this combination of reflections on freedom and equality, and considerations about ways of effecting them within a democratic political order, would also provide the starting point for Bobbio, first of all during the early activist years, and then in the essays of the 1950s that were collected in the volume *Politics and Culture*, two of which, the seventh and the thirteenth, are entirely concerned with Croce. The first of the essays in question, "Croce and the Politics of Culture," expresses a strong measure of agreement with the argument of the final pages of the Gobetti essay that appeared in *Rivoluzione liberale*, above all in his explicit recognition of the "elevated sense of civil responsibility on the part of the scholar" that Croce displayed throughout every period of his life. Here and there Bobbio seems to identify directly with the *forma mentis* of Croce himself, especially when he acknowledges the stress and conflict produced

<sup>13</sup> B. Croce, "Relazioni o non relazioni con Mussolini," in Id., *Nuove pagine sparse*, I, Bari: Laterza, 1966, pp. 94–95.

<sup>14</sup> N. Bobbio, *Italia fedele. Il mondo di Gobetti*, Florence: Passigli, 1986, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> G. Calogero, *Difesa del liberalsocialismo ed altri saggi*, ed. M. Schiavone and D. Cofrancesco, Milan: Marzorati, 1972, p. 192.

[...] by the contrast between his personal inclinations, which encouraged him to withdraw into the world of learning, and his sense of philosophical duty, which forbade him to stay in the ivory tower, between the egoism of the scholar content with his own isolation and the sense of duty of the citizen.<sup>16</sup>

The second of these essays, “Benedetto Croce and Liberalism,” is the most extensive contribution (over 50 pages) included in *Politics and Culture*. Indubitably responding here to the *querelle* that Salvemini launched against Croce in 1946, Bobbio provides a critical analysis of the political thought of the Neapolitan philosopher, and attempts to bring out its valuable insights and its aporias. We have already mentioned the ethical and theoretical points which he had absorbed from Croce’s work over a considerable period. The fundamental problems indicated by Bobbio, raised here in muted form but remaining effectively unchanged in the course of time, can be summarized as follows:

1) Croce never acknowledged that the modern natural law tradition not only harbored and generated the democratic concept of the state, based on political equality, but also the liberal conception which envisages a state that is limited in its power and functions by means of constitutional legality. Bobbio points out that already

[...] from the 16th century, with the early Calvinists political theories, and even more in the 17th century in England, up to Locke’s systematic formulations of the theory, the natural law tradition provided the principal support for the notion of limiting state power: the latter is regarded as limited because natural law, from which individuals derive their original rights, stands over and above positive law,<sup>17</sup>

and individuals derive a “right to resistance” if these original rights are violated.

[...] Since he ascribed no significance to the connection between liberalism and the natural law tradition, Croce [...] ended up by throwing out the theory of limits to state power along with the natural law tradition, that is, the theory that today still distinguishes a liberal political doctrine from other non-liberal doctrines.<sup>18</sup>

2) The fact is that Croce apparently fails to recognize that both liberalism and modern democracy point to an individualistic rather than a holistic conception of reality, the former cast in a libertarian mould, the latter framed in terms of solidarity. In fact, both liberalism and democracy are based on the

<sup>16</sup> Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

value and dignity of the human person, but while liberalism emphasizes “the freedom of the individual from society,” democracy “reconciles the individual with society by turning the latter into the result of a free agreement between reasoning individuals.”<sup>19</sup> But if we start, with Croce, from the notion of absolute spirit as the subject of history and the source of freedom, then this spirit is free by definition even within illiberal regimes, and the acts of despots and oppressors will effectively “belong to the history of liberty with the same right as the acts of liberal political actors.”<sup>20</sup>

3) Croce did not recognize that “egalitarianism was only one aspect, and perhaps not the most important, of the democratic conception of the state,”<sup>21</sup> since the urge towards equality already has an obscure history behind it, and is also characteristic of many modern political movements. The liberal tradition, in particular, correlates the notion of freedom as non-intervention and non-interference with the equality of civil rights, and thus with the acknowledgment that all individuals are legally recognized and protected subjects enjoying freedom of action with respect to the measures of the legislative, executive and judicial power. Of course, modern democracy also has its distinctive features both on the level of general values and that of specific political and constitutional “procedures.” Democratic freedom, rather than emphasizing the absence of external interference with regard to the activity of particular individuals, privileges the conscious exercise of political rights and the assumption of duties necessitated by the logic of consensus. And the equality that results from this is the equal right to be represented in the relevant legislative bodies and to exercise periodic control over the election of their representatives.

We know the anxieties and suspicions that an aristocrat such as de Tocqueville entertained with regard to the idea of equality, which always involves two tendencies: “one turns each man’s attention to new thoughts, while the other would induce him freely to give up thinking at all.” But would not the author of Book I of *Democracy in America* also add, thinking of the “astonishing” events of 1789 in France, that there is “an extreme point where freedom and equality would meet and blend,” and that this happens when all the citizens actively participate in the administration of the common good?<sup>22</sup> As for Bobbio, he has always maintained that significant inequalities of economic, political, and cultural power not only endangers equal democratic dialogue, but also prevents the free development of individuals on

<sup>19</sup> N. Bobbio, “La democrazia dei moderni paragonata a quella degli antichi (e a quella dei posteri),” *Teoria politica*, 3 (1987), p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>22</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. G. Lawrence, London: Fontana Press, 1994, p. 436 and p. 503.



account of the three fundamental forms of discrimination: that between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the weak, between the educated and the uneducated.

Anyone who seriously believes in raising the level of souls and minds, of the souls and minds of everyone, cannot help but work for a politics of social citizenship. Not in order to destroy the “aristocratic claims of thought,” as Croce and Gobetti feared in their different ways, but in order to make the freedoms of all more equal in character. And this is why, in responding to a number of specific questions raised by Calogero in the mid 1970s, Bobbio observed that

[...] while it would not make sense to say that without freedom there is no equality, it is perfectly legitimate to say that without equality (with respect to reciprocal power) there is no freedom.<sup>23</sup>

And in 1986, in the journal founded by Calamandrei, re-evoking the “ideal forum” he had once shared with his “friends” and “companions” from Florence and Turin, Bobbio would reaffirm his own faith in “the guiding force of a movement that is at once liberal and socialist in character, that refuses to relinquish the great liberal tradition of human rights, and strives to extend it in the constant and never concluded struggle for *the emancipation of those who are not free* and for *the increasing equality of those who are not equal*.”<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, it is clear that the democratic order itself is conceived as a potential *institutional path* for promoting both the liberty that is dear to liberals and the equality that is dear to socialists.

4) The distinction between liberalism and modern democracy, which is right and proper, must not be confused with a simple opposition. Bobbio argues as follows:

In contrasting liberalism with democracy in the way he did, Croce [...] paid no regard whatever to the technical significance of these terms, but regarded them both in an ideal sense, as directly opposed philosophical conceptions. And since the opposition, as he sees it, could hardly be more clear – for it involved nothing less than the basic antithesis between the historicist and the Enlightenment approaches – he did not put himself in the best position to recognize that liberalism and democracy, rather than representing antithetical movements, had often been seen, from the perspective of their respective political procedures,

<sup>23</sup> N. Bobbio, “Più eguaglianza” (1976), in Id., *Le ideologie e il potere in crisi*, Florence: Le Monnier, 1981, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> N. Bobbio, “Liberal-socialismo” (1986), in *Cinquant'anni e non bastano. Scritti di Norberto Bobbio sulla rivista “Il Ponte” 1946-1997*, Florence: Fondazione Monte dei Paschi di Siena, 2005, p. 224.

as mutually complementary, and this itself gave rise to the liberal-democratic conception of the state which now prevails in all those countries with a liberal tradition behind them.<sup>25</sup>

Thus even if democratic thought and liberal thought originally arose as autonomous doctrines in significant tension with one another, the practical political development of the most advanced countries (Britain, the United States, France) during the 19th to the 20th century facilitated the formation of liberal-democratic states, firstly through extension of highly limited suffrage, and then with the achievement of universal male and female suffrage, a process encouraged by political associationism and the growing aspiration to general “equality of conditions.” As Bobbio conveniently summarized his position in the 1980s:

Liberal ideals and democratic procedures have gradually become more and more entwined with one another over time, so that if it is true that if rights to liberty have always been the necessary condition for the proper application of the democratic “rules of the game,” it is equally true that the later development of democracy has become the principal means for defending these rights to liberty. Today it is only the states that have emerged from liberal revolutions that are actually democratic, and it is only the democratic states that effectively protect human rights: all the authoritarian states of the world are both anti-liberal and anti-democratic.<sup>26</sup>

5) It is impossible to understand the history of the second half of the last century if we ignore the fundamental connection that has been established between liberalism and democracy. And that is why Croce’s philosophy of liberty had nothing really to say when the moment for social and political reconstruction arrived. During the fascist era itself Croce had “inspired resistance to the oppressors” and “preached [...] the religion of liberty in the noblest terms.” But he preached this religion more than he properly theorized it, either then or later. [...] But when the time came, as with every religion, to give it institutional form, that is, when the religion of liberty had to be transformed into a liberal state, then those pages and so many others that he subsequently composed remained strangely silent, and are now almost entirely forgotten.”<sup>27</sup>

As I have already observed elsewhere,<sup>28</sup> if we compare the pages that Bobbio has dedicated to the thought of Croce with the various discussions

<sup>25</sup> Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, p. 213.

<sup>26</sup> N. Bobbio, *Liberalismo e democrazia* (1985), with an Introduction by F. Manni, Milan: Simonelli, 2006, p. 61.

<sup>27</sup> Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, pp. 225–226.

<sup>28</sup> In the “Introduction” to my edition of Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, p. XXXVIII.

in which he has engaged with Bianchi Bandinelli, Galvano della Volpe and Palmiro Togliatti, two other aspects also clearly emerge:

1) The arguments with which Bobbio challenged Croce's idealist historicism run parallel with those he deployed in relation to Marxist historicism. In fact, neither Croce nor the Italian communists ever regarded liberalism as the theory and practice of the limits of state power. For Croce argued in the name of a meta-political liberalism that effectively dissolves the differences between existing forms of government, and that "cannot account for the role of rights in the process of civilizing the institutions of political power"<sup>29</sup> And the communists argued in the name of a classical economic position that simply regards every state as a complex particular expression of dominant class interests.

2) In Croce's system, according to Bobbio, "a non-personalist conception of the individual (the individual is as a particle of universal Spirit) and a universalist conception of the state (the state as the totality of which the empirical individual is a part)" could "readily serve any number of dictators to justify every attack on freedom, and indeed on empirical freedom as well as on speculative freedom."<sup>30</sup> And similarly, the Marxist tendency to hypostatize the individual as *homo faber* and the identification of the state with dictatorship have been used by the new tyrannies of the 20th century to "liquidate" their opponents in the name of various political ends, but always on the basis of an essentially totalitarian conception of politics.

Bobbio concludes his second essay on Croce with the following perceptive remarks:

The liberal consciousness today cannot abandon supervision of the means that have been forged and tested in the laborious creation of the liberal state. And anyone who fervently shares this consciousness must strive to persuade those who are too impatient and those who are too resigned that the firm grasp of the means is just as important as the firm grasp of the end, [...] to encourage those who are concerned about the fate of democracy in Italy [...] to persevere in the investigation of and the practical engagement with the concrete problems that arise in a free community, and in this connection we can only hope that the despotism of yesterday does not give rise, by way of reaction, to the despotism of tomorrow.<sup>31</sup>

Bobbio had learned from Montesquieu and Locke, and from Constant and Mill, that the end remains "firm" if the means effectively maintain the required separation of powers. For liberalism, in fact, is the art of setting limits to the

<sup>29</sup> For more on this and other aspects of Bobbio's critique of Croce, see the relevant observations of P. P. Portinaro, *Introduzione a Bobbio*, Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2008, pp. 53-66.

<sup>30</sup> Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, p. 212.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

power of others, and to one's own power, in the name of the inalienable rights of the person, and with a full awareness of the fallible and precarious character of human nature. Croce had also started from this last assumption in his *History of Europe* in formulating the golden "rule" of a liberalism which

[...] encourages tolerance, respect for the opinions of others, a readiness to listen and to learn from one's opponents, and, in any case, to understand what they are saying.<sup>32</sup>

Thus when we have witnessed in Italy, in the final decade of the century that has just passed, a strong "tendency to unify political power with economic and political power through the extremely powerful instrument of television," Bobbio appealed to the separation of powers that was theorized by Montesquieu and identified this tendency as another attempt to restore the most ancient form of human government, namely despotism.<sup>33</sup>

The old liberal Right represented by Croce and Einaudi, and subsequently by Giovanni Malagodi, had nothing in common with the new political coalition that assumed the name "Forza Italia" and voiced the "typical demand for law and order in the most reactionary tradition of the Right."<sup>34</sup> In particular, Bobbio expressed extreme concern regarding the "oligarchic demagogue" who dominated this movement since the monopolistic use of means of mass communication would only assist a powerful elected figure to influence and control the electorate as in the times of former authoritarian regimes.<sup>35</sup> In remaining faithful to a methodological approach based on *paired oppositions*, an approach that reflects the tension between different types of concepts and the irresolvable conflict between alternative conceptual regimes (the "great dichotomies" between individualism and organicism, liberalism and communism, reform and revolution, democracy and dictatorship), Bobbio has also revisited and re-examined the dyad of liberalism/despotism.

As I have indicated elsewhere, a question that would be well worth exploring today is whether the oligarchico-political control of the means of mass communication is an exclusively Italian phenomenon or whether it also expresses a general international tendency towards post-totalitarian but despotic forms of controlling and surreptitiously changing the will of the citizens.<sup>36</sup> I speak of post-totalitarian despotism rather than of simple populism

<sup>32</sup> B. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, Bari: Laterza, 1965, p. 39. In the Ocone and Urbinati edition of the work, the passage in question can be found on p. 99.

<sup>33</sup> N. Bobbio, "Separazione come arte liberale," *La Stampa*, 10 February 1994.

<sup>34</sup> "Questa destra non è liberale," an interview in *La Stampa*, 27 October 2000.

<sup>35</sup> N. Bobbio, the Preface to his book, *L'utopia capovolta*, Turin: La Stampa, 1990, p. XV.

<sup>36</sup> F. Sbarberi, "Le sfide neoilluministiche di Bobbio," in N. Bobbio, *Contro i nuovi dispotismi*.

here because – especially in certain countries that have had extended experience in past and more recent times of totalitarianism – significant forms of the concentration and conflation of public and private power, restrictions on freedom of thought, and plebiscitary appeals to “the people” are indicative of an authoritarian conception of the state that undermines the democratic “rules of the game” at their very source.

Sartori has also referred to the existence of a gradual “strategy for the dictatorial conquest of the currently existing democracies [...] that promotes “unconstitutional Constitutions,” i.e. unobtrusively eliminates the structures that guarantee rights through reforms “designed to weaken or absorb all forces capable of resisting or challenging the government in power.”<sup>37</sup> In Italy in particular, from the law of 2001 on international rogatory commissions to the more recent laws on “quick trials” and “legitimate impediment,” there have been more than twenty legislative measures that current prime minister Berlusconi has approved *sibi et suis*, almost always in the aggravating context of “emergency decrees.” Are we perhaps witnessing here the emergence of a *new government of human beings by means of the government of the laws*?

It is impossible to avoid asking this disturbing question, especially since a significant section of the Left still appears mesmerized by the possibility of coming to certain agreements with the current political majority in the particularly sensitive area of serious institutional reforms. For Gustavo Zagrebelsky, who was himself an active partner in discussion with Bobbio in the 1990s regarding the specific pathologies of the Italian case,<sup>38</sup> has indicated the consequences that would ensue in the context of the “power block” that has been established by the current prime minister:

[...] the source of our constitutional decay lies in the anomalous and extraordinary concentration of economic, media and political power in the hands of the same person and in the system of power that has already formed around this person. This not an eccentric or exaggerated concern. For obedience is secured by this leverage over material needs (the economy), intellectual consumption (culture), and the power of authority (politics). The effective unification of these three domains of power is a deadly combination [...]. Those who underestimate, or are unwilling to recognize, the dangers posed by this concentration of power are not in a good position to address the constitutional questions of the present moment with the responsibility that is demanded here.<sup>39</sup>

*Scritti sul berlusconismo*, with a Preface by F. Marzo, Bari: Dedalo, 2008, pp. 83–111.

<sup>37</sup> G. Sartori, *Il sultanato*, Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2009, p. VIII.

<sup>38</sup> G. Zagrebelsky, “Tre poteri concentrati in uno,” *La Stampa*, 9 February 1994.

<sup>39</sup> G. Zagrebelsky, “Ma la reticenza più grave è il conflitto di interessi,” *La Repubblica*, 23 January 2010.

For did not Bobbio himself remind us that significant *inequalities of power* profoundly endanger the shared dialogue of democracy precisely through three fundamental forms of discrimination: the disparity between the educated and the uneducated, between the rich and the poor, and between the holders of political power and the ordinary citizens?

*(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)*

Franco Sbarberi  
University of Turin  
franco.sbarberi@unito.it