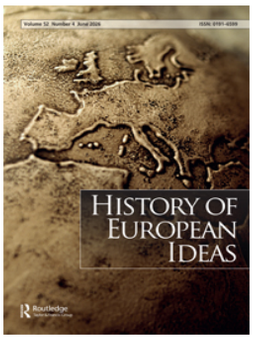

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On Europe, Freedom, and History: Benedetto Croce's Unorthodox Liberalism (1925–1932)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Benedetto Croce's liberalism as a metapolitical response to Italian Fascism, focusing in particular on its relationship with his views on Europe and historical knowledge. Croce's liberalism, deeply rooted in his historicist philosophy, conceived freedom as a dynamic, ever-evolving process inseparable from historical consciousness. His Europeanism, for its part, was not geopolitical but a cultural and philosophical conviction: for Croce, to be liberal was to be historicist, and to be historicist was perforce to be European. From this perspective, he argued that modern freedom emerged through Europe's critical engagement with its own past – a process increasingly threatened, from the 1870s onward, by anti-historicist doctrines. His thought, centred on the tension between individual agency and historical necessity, represents a lasting reflection on the fragility and enduring promise of European liberalism.

KEYWORDS

Benedetto Croce; idea of Europe; liberalism; historicism; antifascism

On 6 September 1925, the antifascist activist Piero Gobetti published an article in *Rivoluzione liberale* hailing Benedetto Croce's decision to take a stand against Fascism. This he described as one of the 'most important events in Italian politics' to have followed the murder of the socialist MP, Giacomo Matteotti.[1] Croce's decision to oppose Mussolini's regime would prove to be a lasting and consequential one, destined to have a key impact on the history of antifascist movements. Croce's final break with Fascism, which followed a period of growing distance during the latter half of 1924, was precipitated by the publication of the *Manifesto degli intellettuali fascisti* in April 1925, a document authored by his former friend and associate Giovanni Gentile. Initially, like so many other liberals and conservatives, Croce had not opposed the rise of Fascism, being more fearful of the communist threat.[2] However, Mussolini having received the support of several prominent Italian artists, journalists, and thinkers, it had now become fully clear to Croce that Fascism would not simply run its course nor would it be 'a bridge' towards a stronger liberal state. He therefore resolved to fight Mussolini's regime in the way he knew best, as 'a thinker and a writer'.[3]

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As Gobetti argued in his article, Croce's newly declared antifascism stemmed from his 'innate Anti-Dannunzianism and Anti-futurism' as much as from his 'distrust of all Italian nationalists', whom he had viewed, before and during the war, as little else than 'petty and dangerous politicians'. But, he noted, there was more to it; there was an unmistakable European dimension to his stance. According to Gobetti, Croce's decision represented the 'rebellion of the *European man* and the man of learning' and a protest by the most 'perfect European type' that Italian culture had produced since the Risorgimento. It was this distinctly 'European antifascism' that should be pointed out to the Italians as a guiding example.[4] Gobetti's remark is interesting for more than one reason. That Croce had always considered himself a member of a European community of scholars is beyond dispute. Fluent in several languages, he possessed a profound knowledge of the works of French, British, and especially German thinkers. Widely respected abroad, he corresponded with and met a remarkable number of intellectuals, including Thomas Mann, Julius von Schlosser, Karl Vossler, Albert Einstein, R.G. Collingwood, Henri Bergson, and Daniel Halévy.[5] In 1920, replying to a French journalist who had questioned him about his alleged philo-Germanism, Croce unhesitatingly declared that, 'in cultural terms', he felt more European than he did Italian.[6] His intellectual perspective, so firmly rooted in European thought, was mirrored in the efforts he undertook throughout his life, as a scholar and an organiser of culture, working with publishers and journals to foster broader, transnational cultural dialogues. As Eugenio Garin noted some time ago, Croce's journal too, *La critica*, which he edited for more than forty years, sought to rescue 'Italy from a narrow provincialism' and to 'teach it to speak a European language'.[7] Croce's was a kind of Europeanism that never amounted to a rejection of his ingrained love for Italy. Rather, it was a sentiment rooted in the intellectual tradition of the Risorgimento – or, more specifically, in Croce's own image of a moderate Risorgimento, which he saw as the 'masterpiece of nineteenth-century liberal-national movements'.[8] It was a reading shared by many other Italian intellectuals, one that rested upon a contrast between Italian unification as a liberal process and the German experience of *Blut und Eisen* – though a contrast, in truth, whose historical credibility is questionable at best.

The profound cultural Europeanism underlying Croce's thought was closely intertwined with a kind of liberalism that, for him, had always been an 'instinct and a habit'.[9] As he wrote to a friend, in 1925, 'liberalism is something that flows in my blood', inherited as 'the *moral* son' of the men and the women who had made the Risorgimento.[10] Precisely at that juncture, with the rise of Fascism, it became an urgent necessity for Croce to define his liberalism more explicitly. As he wrote in a highly favourable review of Guido De Ruggiero's *Storia del liberalismo europeo* (1925), it had 'taken the spur of anti-liberal movements and the attempts to replace the liberal state of the Risorgimento, the work of our fathers, with an anti-liberal state' for ideas of freedom and liberty, long taken for granted, to become once again 'clear and distinct' notions, and for men and women to call for 'a renewed love' of them.[11] From that point onwards, Croce produced a series of works on the nature of liberty, the role of the state and, above all, the relationship between politics, ethics, and history that would make of him the centre of the antifascist movement in Italy and which contributed to defining a particular philosophy of freedom, one firmly grounded in Croce's historicism and closely bound up with his own conception of European identity.

Freedom beyond conventions

That Croce's understanding of freedom was profoundly at odds with classical liberalism, however understood, is widely acknowledged. It was a point already made by Norberto Bobbio in the 1950s when he declared that he would never have recommended Croce's works to anyone seeking to grasp the true nature of liberalism. The crucial contributions to the debate, he insisted, were those of Locke, Montesquieu, Constant, Mill, and Cattaneo. Even Croce's *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (1938) would have been of little guidance – though Bobbio lauded the latter as the 'most important book of the opposition movements'. He admitted that much could still be learned from Croce's unyielding belief that the 'pure philosopher is a time-waster', and that philosophy, unmoored from the 'study of concrete problems', amounted to little more than 'nonsense', if not outright 'rambling'. Now, it was rather paradoxical that, according to Bobbio, precisely because this 'Crocean lesson' had been absorbed so well, the political views of the Neapolitan philosopher, so seemingly abstract and aloof, were now being regarded by many as of limited relevance. In Bobbio's opinion, in fact, Croce's primary failing was that, having detached liberalism 'as an absolute value' from all 'empirical institutions', he had focused on the end to be pursued but neglected the means that ought to be used in its pursuit. It was Croce's insistence on freedom as an end in and of itself that helped to generate those 'moral energies' so desperately needed when it was under grievous threat in the 1930s. But that same insistence, once freedom was no longer in jeopardy and the issue of the means to safeguard it resurfaced, rendered Croce's teachings irrelevant.[12] Of course, Bobbio's arguments invite further reflection and, in part, merit challenge. First of all, it is undeniable that from the mid-1920s onwards Croce's works played a pivotal role in shaping a conception of freedom, albeit vague and blurred, that garnered support from writers and activists with diverse 'liberal' inclinations. Equally undeniable is the fact that the lack of detailed discussion in Croce's writings regarding the institutions that should embody such freedom, and the means by which a liberal regime could be established and sustained, inevitably disappointed many of his readers. Second, the rigid distinction between means and ends that Bobbio imposed on Croce's thought is problematic at best – a distinction that underplays the implicit institutional assumptions embedded in Croce's dialectical and metapolitical account of liberalism. Third, and still more questionable is his assumption that by the mid-1950s freedom had become an undisputed principle and liberal regimes an accepted reality. Indeed, it could easily be argued that by its very nature freedom is always under threat, a tenet to which Croce would most likely have subscribed.

One of the key texts for understanding Croce's views about freedom is his work from 1927, the 'Presupposto filosofico della concezione liberale', a text republished shortly afterwards under the title 'Concezione liberale come concezione della vita'.[13] The main claim here was that liberal thought ought not be regarded as a mere political ideology. On the contrary, the 'liberal conception' represented an inherently 'metapolitical' worldview that transcended 'formal' theories of politics and ethics alike, positing itself as a 'total conception of life'. It could not be placed on the same level as socialist or democratic ideologies, and had also to be distinguished from liberal ones; rather, it belonged to a distinct and superior sphere. It was a conception of existence wholly immanent and constituted and was built upon 'the religion and philosophy of the modern age'.[14]

Stemming from a critique of the Christian separation of Heaven and Earth, the liberal conception rejected the claims of the Church that an individual's conduct and ideas had to be shaped by knowledge that set ends and aims beyond life itself. On the contrary, modern thought was grounded and sought its own justification in a worldly, ever-changing reality that was inseparable from the flux of history itself. Therefore, the social, political, and intellectual realms could only be properly grasped through the concept of 'development' and were to be seen as the outcome of a dialectical process which, thanks to the 'diversity and the contrast of spiritual forces', constantly and endlessly shaped and reshaped life, bestowing its unique meaning upon it. Given that change was intrinsic to life itself, and that the awareness of this was a key acquisition of modern thought, it then followed that the latter essentially renounced the 'claim of ever being "definitive"', giving up all dogmatism and abandoning any hope of solving 'all the problems that endlessly emerge in life' with one single principle. According to Croce, this turn was visible in all spheres of intellectual life. So, modern ethics refused 'the primacy of laws, casuistry and charts of duties and virtues', placing at its centre the exercise of moral judgement in concrete historical situations instead of abstract norms, while modern aesthetics rejected rigid models and rules in favour of an emphasis on 'good taste'. This outlook, Croce noted, had become so widely accepted that the idea that the world was an endless construction, the purpose of which should be sought in reality itself, was one that 'the moderns carry in their own blood'.[15]

In political terms, the implications of such an outlook were profound. The notion that the history of humankind was not determined by higher forces and lacked any specific, predetermined end meant that humanity freely chose its own path. The awareness that 'everything that a human being does or creates is done or created freely', coupled with the recognition by modern thought that reality was constantly and inevitably changing, placed full responsibility for the course of history squarely in human hands.[16] Thus, there was no place in the modern conception of freedom, as Croce construed it, for any form of dogmatism, whether religious or political, or for any principle that claimed universal validity and attempted to place itself beyond history. It was a conception logically incompatible with any ultimate or universally valid principle and, by extension, with any form of rule that distrusted 'spontaneous forces in conflict with one another', seeking to 'prevent or cut short such conflicts' in an attempt to arrest change. Those regimes that posited state, class, nation or race as perpetual truths belonged for Croce to 'an inferior morality', grounded as they were on 'theoretical presuppositions' rendered obsolete by historical events and wholly at odds with modern thought.[17] In this sense, authoritarianism was out of step with history itself, and all attempts to establish and sustain such forms of rule lacked any true intellectual foundation and were destined to yield deleterious consequences. Ultimately, they would be contradicted by the course of history to come.

Within such a reading, one key issue concerned the relationship between the metapolitical conception of freedom and liberalism as a set of political ideas and practices, a relationship that, *prima facie*, might appear somewhat insubstantial. The point was grasped by Antonio Gramsci who, shortly after the publication of the *Storia d'Europa*, remarked in a letter to Tatiana Schucht that Croce had misleadingly conflated freedom 'as a philosophical principle or a speculative notion' with an 'ideology or a practical instrument of government'. If, he noted, according to Croce 'all history is the history of liberty' then 'why should the European history of the nineteenth century be the sole

history of liberty?' After all, if one were to understand history thus liberty could then also be found 'in the oriental satrapies', and the fact that these finally collapsed showed that there too there 'were historical "movements".'[18] Interestingly, a similar criticism appeared in the pages of *Critica fascista*, where Ugo D'Andrea noted that even conceding that freedom was the 'essential element needed to fuel the engine of history' there was no reason to assume that it belonged to 'liberal democracy' alone.[19] Of course, Croce was aware of the issue and constantly wrestled with it. He fully addressed the matter only in 1938, however, in the *Storia come pensiero e azione*. There, insisting that 'liberty is the eternal creator of history as well as the subject of every history', he added that, as such, it was the 'explanatory principle of the course of history' as well as the 'moral idea of humanity'. History itself was 'the work of liberty', for the latter always 'strives to establish and always does establish the social and political condition of a more intense liberty'.[20] By 1938, ethics and morals (howsoever defined) had come to play a new role in Croce's own historicism and, equally noteworthy, greater emphasis was placed on the darker side of history.[21] The *Storia come pensiero e come azione* functioned as a defence of his 'speculative theory of liberty', as Croce himself later remarked, a work in which the philosophical foundations of his views on ethics and politics were reconsidered – offering new and, at times, unsettling answers.[22]

But during our timespan, between 1925 and 1932, Croce only partially addressed the tension between the metapolitical conception of freedom and his political liberalism. As he wrote in the *Storia d'Europa*, liberty 'always has a new matter, often knotty and stubborn, with which it must struggle in order to overcome it and to mould it, and so it may often seem that it is dominated by it'.[23] By its very nature, freedom could never be permanently and indefinitely embodied by any given institution, practice or party. Any institution, even those that aimed to preserve or promote the greatest possible freedom, was inevitably imperfect and sooner or later became outdated because of new circumstances which, importantly, were themselves the product of freedom. Arising from this immanent conception of life, with its rejection of all abstract principles, whether God, state, race or class, was the belief that genuine liberals accepted struggle as an inescapable part of life, and in this acceptance lay the obvious 'superiority' of the liberal conception when compared with the mentality underlying authoritarian regimes.[24] A similar reasoning applied to political parties as well. In his *Politica 'in nuce'* (1924) Croce contended that to 'empirically' define parties as liberal, socialist, conservative or radical was useful and even necessary. However, the crux of the matter was not that of finding ways of being a 'good' radical, socialist, conservative or liberal but, rather, of acting 'in given circumstances, in a way befitting reality, which is neither radical nor socialist nor conservative nor liberal'.[25] Here was another call against all dogmatism and here too was praise of a pragmatic approach that sought specific solutions to concrete problems rather than relying on and adhering to abstract principles. The same point Croce had already made before the war, arguing that parties were too often wrongly understood as the embodiment of an ideology rather than as groups of men and women pursuing their own as well as their country's interests. This misleading understanding, in turn, rendered parties abstract frameworks that restricted the freedom of their members and damaged the collective good. Instead, political parties had to be seen as the outcome of political action rather than its source or premise: 'True political action always requires a stepping outside of the parties to focus, above them, only on the

wellbeing of the country; and this stepping outside of the party is the only way to give life to a new party or to keep the existing ones healthy'.[26] By and large, such a view remained anchored in a late nineteenth-century liberal understanding of political parties and, more broadly, of the liberal state, one in which parties were conceived as loosely organised formations, operating primarily as flexible instruments of parliamentary life rather than as stable organisations claiming to represent clearly defined groups or interests. Underlying Croce's work was a pervasive concern that political parties, in the form they were acquiring in the early twentieth century, might more easily give rise to a tyranny of the majority, thereby undermining the political pluralism he regarded as essential to robust institutions and a healthy society. It was a concern that dovetailed with the need to preserve the greatest possible degree of individual freedom within (and, in some respects, beyond) parties, guarding against their transformation into vehicles for a dogma that might stifle dissent.[27]

The same concerns also informed Croce's stance in his well-known dispute with Luigi Einaudi regarding the nature and relationship between free enterprise (*liberismo*) and political liberalism (*liberalismo*).[28] In particular, Croce argued that the liberal conception of life, and political liberalism as such, did not necessarily entail 'a bond of complete solidarity with capitalism and with the system of free enterprise'. On the contrary, they allowed in principle for different arrangements of property and production, provided that none of the chosen means would 'prevent the criticism of what exists or the search for and the discovery of improvements', thereby allowing the 'unceasing progress of the human mind'.[29] Of course, free enterprise shared the same fundamental principle as political liberalism, namely the immanent and historicist conception of life that Croce identified with his metapolitical freedom. In fact, one could easily recognise 'the working of this principle in two different spheres of life, the economic and the political.'[30] Later, in what would become the first chapters of the *Storia d'Europa*, Croce reiterated the point, asserting that liberalism was not necessarily incompatible with the 'socialisation of means of production' or, come to that, with institutions and practices that did not adhere strictly to *laissez-faire* principles.[31] It was against this latter notion that Einaudi directed his criticism. As the latter saw it, in fact, any idea or institution that might curtail the rights to property and free entrepreneurship was plainly incompatible with political liberalism. Contrary to 'what Croce seems to admit', the 'free mind' always produced an economy that was 'consonant with itself' and thus accepted and fostered the existence and competition of various groups and classes pursuing their own interests. It abhorred the very possibility that the economy might be subjected to a 'single will, a single belief, a single ideology'.[32] Years later, Wilhelm Röpke, siding with Einaudi against Croce, further reinforced these arguments, noting that a specific economic order could not be associated with any particular political order for 'every society, in all its manifestations and all its aspects forms a unit', all its parts entwining with one another. The economy, Röpke argued, did not escape this rule; it was part of the 'global order of society'.[33]

In reality, such a criticism was not entirely grounded, since Croce himself would have accepted the idea of a tightly-knit unity between the political, economic and social spheres – a differentiation that he would have considered, in truth, as a mere intellectual ruse. However, by explaining economic and political change through the freedom of Spirit, Croce allowed for the possibility that, in given circumstances, individuals could

freely choose a greater (or lesser) intervention of the state in the economy or even some sort of collectivisation to address specific challenges. What Croce truly feared, though, was that *laissez-faire* might evolve into a dogma, unduly limiting freedom of thought and action. This he saw as a concrete risk given that free enterprise, he noted, had already posited itself as 'a supreme law of social life', turning, from a 'legitimate economic principle', into an 'illegitimate' and all-encompassing 'ethical theory'. Such a transformation was a consequence of its intertwining with that 'ethical utilitarianism' championed by authors such as Claude Frédéric Bastiat, who had portrayed economic liberalism as the theory of a 'general cosmic harmony'.[34] Croce's aim, by contrast, was to free both thought and action from the rigidity of any doctrine, enabling independent judgement and making it possible for decisions to be guided by practical considerations rather than lofty dogmas. In this lay a key element of his metapolitical conception of freedom, with which political liberalism as such resonated, since it avoided setting limits and created an 'open field' within which economic, social, and political forces could 'compete among themselves and cooperate in harmonious discord.'[35] Indeed, Croce saw competition and even struggle as essential to modern society. And he praised political liberalism for granting free play to the 'spontaneous and inventive forces of individuals and social groups', believing that only by so doing could any 'mental, moral, and economic progress be expected'.[36] This conviction deepened in the late 1920s. By the time authoritarianism and fascism, rather than an Italian exception, was becoming a general European affliction, he opined that the superiority of the 'modern conception' lay in its having changed the sense of life from the 'idyllic to [the] dramatic', from the hedonistic 'to [the] active and creative'. In doing so it had turned freedom into 'a continual liberation, a continual battle', one in which final victory was impossible because it would have signified 'the death of all combatants, that is, of all the living'.[37]

'Individual' freedom: From the abstract to the historical

One of the central concerns of classical liberal thought is the place of the individual within society and his or her rights vis-à-vis the state. In the majority of Croce's writings, however, the individual seems to hold limited relevance. This can partly be attributed to the focus of his intellectual project, which was primarily directed towards 'Spirit' – that is, humanity as a whole, understood through its historical development. This emphasis has been one further reason why many commentators have distanced him from the liberal tradition. For one, Carlo Antoni, a critical and somewhat unorthodox follower of Croce, argued that the latter's liberalism suffered from a rejection of the 'absolute value of the individual' and therefore ultimately lacked a 'concrete point of reference'. According to Antoni, this limitation rendered Croce's notion of political freedom somewhat abstract, and he warned against the risk of it becoming 'a goddess with Alcinean seductions' – an enticing but insubstantial idea.[38] In truth, the issue is far more complex, so much so that it might easily be argued that the individual – or, more precisely, the individual as the expression of 'Spirit' – had been a central concern for Croce at least from the late first decade of the twentieth century onwards.[39] In truth, if the individual for Croce was merely a 'semblance' and of limited relevance, as part of the whole, of 'Spirit' and as the only means through which the latter could manifest itself, it was nonetheless crucial, contributing as it did to the history of humankind.

From this standpoint, and in line with his own historicism, Croce maintained in fact that an individual's 'feelings and works' held relevance if they impacted the lives of others and thus contributed to the whole, 'eternally' living on, in and through a perpetually renewed reality.[40] Inevitably, such a notion raises the question of the place of individual freedom within Croce's philosophy since, ultimately, he believed that a person's actions and volitions acquired meaning only when considered in relation to the whole. In point of fact individual deeds he saw as being at one and the same time 'free and necessary'.[41] On the one hand, they were necessary because they were shaped by historical circumstances and were bound to the collective, to the point where an individual's work could be seen as a 'charge entrusted to him' by Spirit and their 'strength' somehow 'borrowed' from Spirit itself.[42] On the other hand, individuals were also free since any volition (and, for Croce, every act was a volition) contributed to an ever-evolving reality, creating something new and thus producing historical change. Volition, he argued, was 'initiative, creation, and, therefore, an act of freedom'.[43] This capacity to contribute to the life of the whole manifested itself most vividly in a poet's inspiration, a philosopher's original idea or a statesperson's foresight in navigating a particular situation. Each was a testament to the individual's creative power.

To better illustrate the relationship between constraint and freedom, and between the whole and the individual, was a complex task, one example Croce used being that of those poets who, though bound by their time and circumstances, nonetheless produced works that were new, connected to the 'previous situation yet not identical with it'. They were both bound by their predecessors and yet free; '[c]onservatives and revolutionaries' at once, they embodied 'centuries of history, thought, and poetry' while also contributing something new, something that belonged to 'the present and will be the future: *chargés du passé, gros de l'avenir*'.[44] Their creative act gained significance only as a part of the impersonal historical process and was ultimately inseparable from Spirit. The point was underscored by Croce's distinction between 'action' and 'event'. While the former always belonged to the individual, the latter emerged from the aggregate of all volitions and was shaped, ultimately, by humankind and its past. The individual's volition was merely a contribution to the 'volitions of all the other beings in the universe', whereas the event, history itself, was the synthesis of 'all the wills and the answer to all the questions'.[45] History was not the product of any single person's will but of a larger reality which, interestingly, Croce came to describe in a quasi-religious tone: 'We are the servants of that reality which generates us and knows more than we do; that reality of which religions have caught a glimpse and called it God, father, and eternal knowledge'.[46] Clearly, Croce was seeking a balance between individual volition and collective constraints, aiming to address the shortcomings of both deterministic and free will theories. The former viewed volition as nothing more than the reproduction of past circumstances; the latter treated it as an entirely free act, 'stemming from nothingness'. It was by juxtaposing the antithesis between these 'two one-sided theses' to that between 'materialism and mysticism' that Croce forged his doctrine of 'a freedom that is also necessity' – which he named, somewhat confusingly, 'idealism'.[47]

From the perspective of classical liberal thought, a pressing danger within Croce's thesis lay in his notion of Spirit turning into a kind of divinity, though an immanent one, that could undermine individual freedom. Since Croce always considered his

philosophy as a weapon against both mysticism and materialism, such a danger was particularly striking. Although he consistently maintained that the individual was inseparable from the universal, an underlying unease thus emerged in some of his writings, especially after the 'completion' of his 'Philosophy of Spirit', marked by the publication of *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (1915–1917).[48] Such was the case with a text penned in 1928, at a time when Croce's struggle against fascism was well under way and when authoritarianism was casting its ever-darker shadow over Europe. In it, remarking once again that in most realms of thought the separation between universal and individual had been overcome thanks to nineteenth-century historicism, Croce contended that within political philosophy, the individual, rational and free, as imagined by eighteenth-century contractarian theories, could no longer be simplistically contrasted with the state, nor could freedom be misleadingly pitted against authority. Having transcended the limitations and drawbacks of eighteenth-century liberal thought, historicism had clearly shown that the individual and the state 'would [each] not have meaning and life without the other' and that 'truth lies in their relationship'. Interestingly, Croce then added that the outdated, abstract eighteenth-century notion of the individual, conceived as an entity somehow 'detached from the state' could still prove valuable in instances when 'dialecticians' resorted to the notion of 'a static identity' or when political theorists crushed 'individuality and freedom under the so-called state and so-called authority'. In these cases, the state was once again posited as a 'universal abstract', an idolised abstraction removed from the flow of history. Indeed, this was precisely what Fascist ideologues had been promoting since 1925.[49] Against these conceptions, even the antiquated notion of the abstract individual could acquire renewed strength since, however outdated, it represented 'a more mature stage in the historical and logical process' in such circumstances and in the face of such enemies.[50]

All this confirms the extent to which Croce's ideas about freedom were anchored in his studies of the past, a past to which he was increasingly drawn during the years of the fascist regime.[51] It was an engagement that began in earnest in 1924, with the *Storia del Regno di Napoli* and the forging of his 'ethical-political' history. It culminated with the *Storia d'Europa*, in which Croce celebrated that 'religion of freedom' which, he argued, had taken hold of nineteenth-century Europe. This intellectual journey led to an ever-widening perspective, expanding from the history of Naples to a broader European canvas through the *Storia dell'età barocca in Italia* (1929) and the *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915* (1928) – which Croce, significantly, regarded as 'the history of all of us Europeans'. It was a broadening reflected in the 'Contrasti d'ideali politici dopo il 1870' (1927) and 'Antistoricismo' (1930), both of which were pivotal in his reflections about European history.[52] Crucially, alongside this trajectory, which led to his rethinking of European history as such, was also a reconsideration of the very notion of freedom. In this respect, it is significant that the final work in this sequence, the *Storia d'Europa*, was a hymn to freedom:

> [T]he sole ideal that has the solidity once owned by Catholicism and the flexibility that this was never able to have, the only one that can always face the future and does not claim to determine it in any particular and contingent form, the only one that can resist criticism and represent for human society the point around which, in its frequent upheavals, in its continual oscillations, equilibrium is perpetually restored. So that when the question is heard whether liberty will enjoy what is known as the future, the answer must be that it has

> something better still: it has eternity. And today too, notwithstanding the coldness and the contempt and the scorn that liberty meets, it is in so many of our institutions and customs and our spiritual attitude, and operates beneficently within them.[53]

Importantly, this pivotal passage from the *Storia d'Europa*, encapsulating Croce's views about freedom in the early 1930s, has been subject to misinterpretation, leading some to perceive his entire history of Europe as a celebration of the inevitable and guaranteed triumph of freedom – an 'Augustinian act of faith in the City of God', as one commentator all too hastily put it some time ago.[54]

In reality, Croce's views about Europe and its history were at the time far less optimistic than his critics believed. The *Storia d'Europa* explicitly divided the history of nineteenth-century Europe into two distinct phases, seeing in the 1870s a decisive watershed.[55] At that precise historical juncture, Croce argued, the ideal of freedom which had inspired liberal movements across the continent had succeeded, finding its political embodiment in the institutions of most (Western) European nation-states. However, precisely because the ideal of freedom had been realised, its vitality began to wane. What followed was the rise of nationalism, imperialism, the cult of force, and, in the intellectual sphere more specifically, the spread of various forms of Decadentism. It was as if the 'moral enthusiasm' of the earlier part of the century had died out, giving way to an 'incipient dissatisfaction' with the ideal of liberty progressively taking hold of the minds of politicians and thinkers. The initial fervour had faded precisely because the ideal of freedom had been achieved. It was something that might have been expected since, noted Croce, a 'Church triumphant' inevitably mustered less vigour and inspired less enthusiasm than a 'Church persecuted'. When freedom began to be considered as 'something acquired' and an 'assured possession', the very fervour that had once sustained it started to dissipate.[56] Rather than a *Civitas Dei*, the history of nineteenth-century Europe was in truth the story of a struggle to sustain the spirit of freedom; a fight that arose through the inherent contrast between 'eneacute;rgeia', the dynamic energy that drives freedom as a living, active force, and '*ergon*', the static product of freedom that calcifies such energy into a fixed condition and habitual state. This tension had begun to tilt towards passivity by the 1870s, so much so that the allure of *ergon* – complacency, habit, and passive acceptance – had gradually sapped the energy that had once animated Europe's thirst for freedom.[57] The relationship between *enérgeia* and *ergon* was intrinsically fraught, and particularly uncertain was the extent to which the latter preserved the vitality of the former.

Obviously, the degree to which institutions and parties maintained or dissipated the energy of freedom was central to the ways in which history unfolded. In the nineteenth century, according to Croce, the triumph of liberal institutions was intertwined with an increasing awareness that humanity decided its own fate and made its own history. Although this was not an entirely novel idea, only in the seventeenth century had it begun to be accepted, reaching its 'full blossoming' in the first half of the nineteenth century. Only then did people become 'conscious of the essential character of freedom and of its status as a supreme principle', finally setting aside transcendental and religious beliefs to explain history and to justify laws and rules.[58] The significance of this intellectual and cultural turn was made abundantly clear in the *Storia d'Europa*, where Croce maintained that the true nature of freedom and its centrality to history were most

fully acknowledged and realised in the nineteenth century – and, it could be claimed, in Europe alone:

> Man, then, no longer looked on himself as belittled by history or as vindicating himself against it and pushing the past away from him as a shameful memory. Instead, a true and tireless creator, he looked on himself in the history of the world as he looked on himself in his own life. No longer did history appear destitute of spirituality and abandoned to blind forces or sustained and constantly directed by alien forces. Now it was seen to be the work and the activity of Spirit, and so, since Spirit is liberty, the work of liberty.[59]

Crucially, the central role Croce attributed to nineteenth-century thought was consistent with his long-standing scepticism towards the Enlightenment. His perspective directly challenged the widely accepted notion that modern liberalism had its roots in eighteenth-century thought and, by so doing, it departed sharply from most liberal orthodoxies. Croce's was a move that rendered his position anomalous to many contemporaries – scholars such as De Ruggiero, Gobetti, Julien Benda, Paul Hazard, and Franco Venturi who, in the 1920s and 1930s, explicitly celebrated the Enlightenment and its values as the only effective bulwark against authoritarian regimes.[60] It was this outlook that has led some scholars – most notably Zeev Sternhell – to place Croce within that 'Anti-Enlightenment tradition' that ended up fuelling the rise of totalitarianism.[61]

Much has been written about Croce's views on the Enlightenment and, in particular, his alleged rejection of its significance.[62] Indeed, in his 1909 *Logica come scienza del concetto puro*, Croce famously criticised the eighteenth century as 'mathematical, abstractionist, intellectualistic, [and] anti-historical', describing it as the 'legitimate son' of that Cartesianism which 'mistakes the logic of philosophy for the logic of mathematics'.[63] Similar comments studded Croce's later writings and, essentially, he stood by this assessment for much of his life. The point was reiterated in his *Filosofia di Giambattista Vico* (1911), and, during the First World War, in a text tellingly entitled 'Contro il secolo decimottavo', he censured the persistence of the 'eighteenth-century mentality' in his own day, identifying it as the chief obstacle to 'the autonomy of politics' from morals.[64] Central to Croce's critique was his belief that one of the fundamental flaws of Enlightenment thought lay in its tendency to conflate philosophical concepts with empirical ones – or, as he also referred to them, 'pseudo-concepts'. The former were 'universal' categories of the mind, such as beauty, purpose, quality or development, which, by their very nature, transcended any specific form. Empirical concepts, conversely, were 'general' concepts, inherently contingent and historically determined representations of an ever-changing reality, designed to apprehend it.[65] According to Croce, the blurring of these two kinds of notion had momentous consequences for Enlightenment political thought. So, for one, in discussing the idea of natural law, Croce emphasised the eighteenth century's tendency to seek criteria for judgement and models for action in reason itself, as if reason could ever be above and beyond historical reality. Such a misleading assumption, on which eighteenth-century contractarian theories were ultimately built, was distilled in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Du Contrat social* (1762), one of its 'most extreme' expressions.[66] As Croce has it, notions of natural law and individual rights, which were so crucial to Enlightenment political thought and which would later become pillars of liberalism as such, had fostered a rationalistic, intellectualistic, and abstract

philosophy that arbitrarily transformed historically determined values into universal ones, used to address a wide and disparate array of political and moral issues.[67] Those allegedly (but mistakenly) universal notions depicted an unattainable ideal world, ultimately giving rise to the zealotry of the Jacobins and the horrors of the Terror.

However, while Croce criticised eighteenth-century rationalism and the allegedly eternal principles it produced, he acknowledged its merits too. This recognition appeared early in his *Logica*, where he praised the Enlightenment for its capacity to question dogmas and myths. The Age of Enlightenment he recognised as the 'last great epoch of this strife' against dogmas, an age that helped free humanity from the constraints of religious orthodoxy. It was this capacity for deconstructive reasoning – the *pars destruens* of Enlightenment thought – that most appealed to Croce, largely because of its intrinsic liberating force. Here lay its most 'serious and fruitful side'.[68] A few years later, Croce further reflected on the political effects of Enlightenment thought, recognising the extent to which it had provided individuals with the 'arms and flags' necessary to fight against the 'last vestiges of the Middle Ages' and to counter 'feudal and clerical privileges' when 'modern society' emerged. Interestingly, he admitted that this drive for change was fuelled precisely by those abstract and intellectualistic principles that he was censuring. Those 'weapons' had become available precisely because 'abstract reason denied all the laborious and complicated products of history, and affirmed only reality, rational reality, to be made and remade with the aid of reason'. In the name of these principles, it became possible to discredit all those laws, institutions and customs that were then still tolerated, thereby ridding men and women of the odious remnants of 'fanaticism and superstition' from past centuries.[69] The significance of Enlightenment philosophy had been duly recognised in the nineteenth century, when 'philosophical idealism', having 'surpassed' the abstract rationalism of the previous century, nonetheless paid tribute to it, acknowledging that 'even in the form of abstract and mathematical reason and of individualistic and atomistic liberty', it had asserted 'reason, liberty, and the new humanism against the old transcendency'.[70]

The nineteenth century that Croce so greatly admired he never understood as a mere reaction to, or even a denial of, eighteenth-century thought. On the contrary, as has been rightly noted, he viewed the Age of Enlightenment as the time when 'the intellectual means were forged that would later form the foundation of the idealist doctrines in philosophy and liberal political thought of the nineteenth century.'[71] In a text published in 1938, he not only emphasised the continuity between Enlightenment thought and historicism but also the unity of 'modern' history as such which 'first took on the name of Renaissance and then those of Rationalism, Enlightenment, and liberalism'.[72] In the *Storia come pensiero e come azione*, published that same year, Croce contended that nineteenth-century historicism developed in opposition to the Enlightenment but ultimately 'elevated itself' above it. Historicism sought to correct its abstract rationalism, aiming to become 'more profoundly rationalistic' not by merely rejecting the 'irrational' but, rather, understanding it within the framework of human activity. Thus, Croce argued, historicism could rightly be considered the 'heir of the Enlightenment,' representing a force that, 'in active and practical life, marked a new tendency towards liberty'. This was no longer the freedom of the 'abstract and atomic' individual imagined by the political philosophy of the previous century but a kind of freedom at once 'concrete' and somehow 'unified in social and historical life'. In political terms, 'the historical liberal conception

of life', emerging from the France of the Restoration and the July Monarchy, spread throughout Europe, and Enlightenment thought 'was then integrated into historicism, passing into and receiving a practical regeneration in liberalism'.[73] These ideas were entirely consistent with Croce's own views about the dialectical development of history, as well as his belief that the past always lives on in complex ways in the history to come. The emphasis on continuity rather than rupture between the Enlightenment on the one hand and historicism and liberalism on the other was already evident in the *Storia d'Europa*. There, he connected the rise of a 'common European consciousness' after the 1830s with the formation of a shared set of opinions, sensibilities, and ideas, which he saw as central to the liberal movement. As he saw it, the latter simply was 'the continuation of the Enlightenment movement'.[74] Not only did Croce's historicism logically underscore the unity of modern European history as such but, consistently with its own assumptions, it also emphasised the idea that the emergence of a modern conception of life – and with it, the rise of liberalism itself – was a distinctly European phenomenon.

Freedom 'through' the past and the idea of Europe

In 1935, in response to an article published in *La cultura*, Croce once again insisted on the continuity between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought. As he noted, the 'correction and completion' of the mindset typical of the Age of Enlightenment that occurred in the nineteenth century consisted 'solely' in 'deepening the mental process' that had already begun, and by forging, within the premises laid out in the eighteenth century, a notion of 'reason not in an abstract way but historically active and operative'. Such a 'correction and completion' bore fruit not only in philosophy and historiography, but also in 'the entire practical politics of the nineteenth century'.[75] In point of fact, as Girolamo Imbruglia has convincingly argued, Croce's views on the Enlightenment evolved throughout his life, and by the 1920s he had come to cast it in a more positive light.[76] What remained unchanged was his belief in its essentially anti-historicist nature – that is, its denial of the importance of the past and its underlying dichotomy between nature and history. It was a conviction already evident in Croce's *Filosofia di Giambattista Vico*. There, noting how seventeenth-century thought had helped hone the tools of historical enquiry and 'detect impostures and bridge lacunae', he also contended that authors such as Bayle, Fontenelle, and Saint-Évremond had been dangerously engaged in a 'historical Pyrrhonism' that sowed the seeds of 'the polemic against the truthfulness and utility of history' that would flourish 'with immense vigour' in the eighteenth century. This tendency, he argued, was 'hypercritical rather than critical', its aim being 'the destruction of history in general'.[77] Similar ideas were expressed a few years later, in *Teoria e storia della storiografia*. There too, Croce criticised eighteenth-century thought for its 'lack of esteem towards history'. Deeming it an 'inferior reality', the Enlightenment considered it 'unworthy' of the philosopher who, in contrast, was called upon to seek constant, uniform, and general laws, and could thus dispense with 'that long, useless, and dangerous tour of facts narrated in histories'.[78]

The role of the past in the nineteenth century – which, as Croce reminded his readers, had 'rightly been called the "century of history"' – was fundamentally different.[79] The recognition that reality could not be understood independently of history, and that

political changes had to rely on an understanding of the past rather than abstract reason, had become essential. This shift mirrored the demise of the idea of 'progress'– a concept that, throughout the eighteenth century, had become ubiquitous, the yardstick for judging 'facts, the conduct of life, the construction of history'. Such a demise had been beneficial in several ways, not least because, according to Croce, behind the idea of progress lurked a residue of Christian theology, a dangerous teleological principle that, by positing the assured and unending betterment of humankind, charted a seemingly certain path, thereby restricting human freedom.[80] Thanks to the revolution of historicism, the notion of progress was supplanted by that of 'development', which stood instead as that 'perpetual surpassing which is at the same time a perpetual conservation'.[81] The concept of development, which had the merit of acknowledging that history was neither mere change nor mere continuity, had become deeply ingrained in modern thought, entering 'deeply into the blood and bones' of men and women.[82] It was a shift largely driven by the widespread circulation of Vico's works in the early nineteenth century and the increasing influence of Hegelian philosophy, which fostered the conviction that reality engendered itself, growing from within.[83] The causes of such an intellectual turn dovetailed – or, more properly, from the Crocean standpoint, were one and the same – with the recognition that the political failures of the French Revolution and the Terror lay in the anti-historicism of the Jacobins, the children, as Croce had it, of Enlightenment thinkers. As he argued, if the 'triumph and the catastrophe of the Enlightenment was the French Revolution', then the Revolution itself was at once the 'triumph and catastrophe of its historiography'.[84] Viewed from this angle, the Romantic reaction to the Revolution and the Romantic historiography emerging in the first half of the nineteenth century could be seen as efforts to restore to the past its due role, countering the anti-historicism of the previous century.

Croce's aversion to anti-historicism, in whatever form it appeared, as well as the key role he gave to Romanticism in shaping modern liberal thought, remained steadfast throughout his life.[85] Yet it was only during the years of the Fascist regime that these beliefs came to intertwine more clearly with Croce's ideas about freedom, on the one hand, and with his views about Europe, its malaise, and its (possible) future, on the other. This could be seen in the *Storia d'Europa*, in particular in the third chapter, which opened by stating that '[c]ontemporary with the rise and growth of idealism and liberalism, and often in the same individuals, was the birth and expansion of Romanticism'. Such a 'simultaneity' was not a 'mere juxtaposition' but, rather, a 'relation or a multiplicity of relations'.[86] Croce then went on to distinguish between Romanticism in the 'theoretic and speculative sense' and Romanticism in the 'practical, sentimental, and moral field'. The first stood as the 'revolt' against the intellectualism that had dominated the Age of Enlightenment. As such, it 'awakened the feeling for genuine and great poetry', it restored passion and individuality to their rightful place, and it 'thrust back into their natural limits the natural and mathematical sciences'. By grasping 'life in its active and combative sense', it thus prepared the 'theoretical premises of liberalism'. Even in its irrational concepts, such as the 'primacy sometimes allotted to emotion and mystic ecstasy', Croce saw a 'justified polemic against abstract intellectualism'. In this irrationality there was still a 'nucleus of rational truth'. Crucially, this form of Romanticism 'knew and made known the right of what exists and operates in all its varieties according to time and place, and founded modern historiography, interpreting it

no longer as mockery and derision of past ages, but as understanding of these as parts of the present and the future'. Moral and practical Romanticism, on the other hand, belonged to a different sphere, so much so that the 'greatest liberators from the chains of intellectualism' always shrank from it, considering it 'pathological and shameful'. It was a mindset that possessed 'neither the old nor the new faith, neither the authoritative one of the past nor the clear one of the present, and showed precisely that it was a lack of faith, toiling in eagerness to create one and impotent to do so'. From this emerged an empty sentimentalism, a hollow Catholicism, a trivial nostalgia for the past – especially for the Middle Ages – and an ephemeral aestheticism. These were artificial and superficial expressions of an intellectual and moral void since, argued Croce, 'faith is born spontaneously and necessarily from the truth that obliges us to listen to it in the depths of our consciousness'.[87] The final outcome of such a form of Romanticism was that 'malady of the century', that profound malaise that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century manifested as Decadentism, a phenomenon Croce had always abhorred and denounced.[88] In contrast to this, theoretical Romanticism formed the very foundation of modern thought. Rooted in the rejection of intellectualism and the atomistic notion of the individual, it asserted reason as understood and grounded historically. While rejecting any empty veneration of the past for its own sake, it emphasised the importance of understanding it in relation to both the present and the future. In doing so, it served to hone the tools of modern historiography and helped to shape the idea of development as key to interpreting history.

Views similar to these had already been set forth in Croce's 'Antistoricismo', a paper presented at the Seventh International Congress of Philosophy in Oxford, in September 1930 and in which were distilled the main assumptions underpinning the *Storia d'Europa*.[89] In the paper, Croce acknowledged that within the artistic, intellectual, moral, and political life of most European countries a 'decadence of the historical feeling' and in some cases even 'a manifest anti-historical attitude' had taken hold. The emergence and strengthening of such a mindset, disdaining and even dismissing entirely the role of historical understanding in various spheres of human life, manifested in two distinct yet 'opposite' forms. The first was an attitude that idolised 'a future without a past', denying both tradition and historical knowledge the importance due to them, seeking progress for its own sake and advocating a blind leap forward, driven by an 'arbitrary will'. Celebrating 'strength for the sake of strength, doing for the sake of doing, the new for the sake of the new, life for the sake of life', it severed all connections with the past, ignoring the obvious fact that the present was its product and continuation. As a result, this mindset led to a 'life in the abstract' and the rejection of all values and principles. Importantly, this form of anti-historicism, with its insistence that 'the past is dead', ultimately undermined the very possibility of understanding the present.[90] The second form of anti-historicism, conversely, abhorred 'the idea itself of history as the realm of the relative and the contingent', of diversity and difference, of the individual as such. It strove 'for the absolute' and aimed to obtain 'security and peace' by escaping history. Unlike the first kind of anti-historicism, with its extreme and irrational activism, this second sort sought the end of history itself and the attainment of a perpetual and fixed order. Here, competition, struggle, and 'individual initiative' were suppressed, whether through new rules and norms or through laws taken 'from an age or a society belonging to the past' – a step, the latter, which according to Croce was the 'most

flagrant denial of history' itself.[91] When comparing the two forms of anti-historicism, Croce argued that while the first produced anarchy, the second led to various forms of authoritarian regime. While both sought to offer a solution to the challenges posed by modernity – through their rejection of traditional values, existing norms, and ideals as products of history – both ultimately suppressed individual freedom. As such, they sharply contrasted with the philosophy of modernity identified by Croce in his explanation of the metapolitical conception of freedom. Both anti-historicisms were out of step with modernity itself.

When asking his Oxford audience where the causes of present-day anti-historicism should be sought, Croce remarked that the search would have required retracing the history of nineteenth-century Europe, particularly from the 1870s onwards. By focusing on this time frame, it would have become clear that 'no new ideal of spiritual and human life' had emerged since the age that had 'culminated in the joint work of the French Revolution and idealist and historical philosophy'. By 1870, when the values sown by nineteenth-century liberal movements had achieved their aim, they had lost part of their original energy. From then onwards, the two forms of anti-historicism – the one with its abstract rationalism and the other with its irrationalism – had gained strength. These movements ultimately fed into imperialism, nationalism, communism, 'ethical statism' – that is, Italian fascism – and reinvigorated a hollow clericalism. All were forces and movements that, in different ways, had stifled the 'noble critical mindset' and the capacity of men and women to engage critically with the past. Croce's historicism, which he himself identified with 'culture and civilisation' as such, was thus being threatened by a malady sweeping across Europe, an illness that was one and the same with the 'decadence of the liberal ideal'. In some countries this had led to the triumph of illiberal regimes, while in others, he observed with bitterness, it could be seen in the words, deeds, books, and political practices of individual writers, politicians, and statespersons. On one level, the decadence of the historical feeling and liberalism were interconnected: 'Historical and liberal feelings are, in truth, inseparable, so much so that history can be defined no better than as the "history of freedom," since only through this can meaning be obtained, and only for this reason does it become intelligible'. On another level, the 'historical sentiment' seemed to coincide with the 'European sentiment' since, argued Croce, 'Europe concentrates the richest and most noble human history'. Restating, albeit in a new guise, the old liberal assumption that 'Europe has produced the liberal ideal', taking upon itself 'the mission of civilising the whole world', Croce argued that the history of any of its nations could not be properly understood in isolation, detached from its European context, from the history of that 'organism of which they are members'. Even the Great War had highlighted the existence of 'this common European humanity', with its shared 'virtues and common defects' and facing the same problems. It was for such a reason, because of the connection between historical and European sentiments that, Croce quipped, 'to uproot oneself from Europe after being uprooted from history is, undoubtedly, a wholly consistent aim' though, he added with bitterness, 'of that consistency which is admired in madmen'.[92]

By and large, Croce believed that if the nineteenth century had witnessed the accomplishment of the liberal mindset and the consolidation of liberal institutions, embodied in the nation-state – above all in the form produced by the Italian Risorgimento – it had also been, for exactly the same reason, the 'century of history'. As he had it, while each age was

the realisation of all previous centuries and contained them within itself, unlike the Renaissance, the Reformation or the Enlightenment – which, in their quest for newness, had often disparaged past centuries – the nineteenth century had acknowledged the key role of history as a part of itself. Nineteenth-century thought had exhibited a greater 'historical character' and demonstrated an ability to embrace, as well as to critically engage with, the past, rather than merely to reject it. And this had been crucial in shaping modern thought and the meta-liberal conception envisaged by Croce. Herein lay its peculiarity.[93] The point would be fully developed in the *Storia come pensiero e come azione*, where Croce directly related the metapolitical conception of freedom to liberal thought itself, with the modern forging of a critical approach to the past and its study. There, insisting once again that men and women lived 'immersed in the past', he claimed that the only way to achieve freedom and move 'towards a new life' without getting 'out' of or 'above' the past was through a form of thought that did not sever its ties with the past but 'ideally rises above it and converts it into knowledge'. Only the 'writing of history liberates us from history', he contended.[94] But this intellectual liberation from the past only had any value if it inspired individuals to overcome the predicaments and challenges they faced. It was a liberation that made it possible (though by no means necessary) to live a fuller civic life, fixing a 'practical purpose' and paving the way for the 'struggle between good and evil, useful against harmful, beautiful against ugly, true against false – in a word value against non-value'.[95] Interestingly, while this notion had not yet been fully developed within the time frame discussed here, it was already alluded to in a 1927 addendum to *Teoria e storia della storiografia*. In that passage, historical knowledge was regarded as key to the 'moral improvement' of men and women and thus 'inseparable from the advance of humanity'. According to Croce, the study of the past served as a 'great examination of conscience that humanity' every so often performed 'on itself, its actions, and its progress'.[96] Only through this examination could the direction towards a better future be gauged.

Conclusion

In 1919, José Ortega y Gasset, an author with whom Croce had much in common, wrote that liberalism was the 'highest ideal that had been invented hitherto by humanity, the European idea par excellence'. He then went on to add that its most 'elegant' characteristic was that it could only fight 'after having ceded its own weapon to the enemy'.[97] Croce would have largely agreed with this, particularly the idea that liberalism, rather than merely rejecting or denying its opponents, always entered into a complex relationship with them. More importantly, he would have accepted that liberalism, both as a political and as a metapolitical notion, was an inherently European phenomenon, emerging from its unique path to modernity. Indeed, Europe, modernity, freedom and, one should add, historical thought itself were so tightly interwoven in Croce's texts that one might argue they coincided. Of course, underlying Croce's view was an inherently Eurocentric set of assumptions. But Croce himself would have accepted the point. In fact, for him it was 'evident that history, as conceived by the Europeans, cannot help but be 'Eurocentric', and that only in relation to the course of Greco-Roman, Christian, and Western civilisation do the civilisations that developed along different lines become current and comprehensible to us' – unless,

he added, one wished 'to turn history into an exhibition hall of different types of civilisation, with a prize for the wisest!'[98]

Perhaps nowhere more than in his meditations on nation and nationalism does the nature of the Crocean equivalencies between Europe, historical criticism, and freedom become clearer. In fact, in the *Storia d'Europa*, Croce praised the nation for helping overcome the abstract cosmopolitanism of the eighteenth century, and for promoting 'humanity in its concrete form, that of personality, both of individual men and of human complexes, bound by common origins and memories, customs, and attitudes'. Having thus tied the individual to humanity and history, it had become the source for building the future and the driving force behind the struggle for freedom – a form of concrete freedom firmly rooted in the past. Understood as it was in the first half of the nineteenth century – that is, as a historical principle rather than a 'naturalistic and immobile' reality – it could be criticised and eventually overcome. It was a force for progress and change.[99] However, by the end of the century the nation had become a rigid and withered ideal. What had once been a wellspring of progress over time had morphed into a force of inaction, aiming to present itself as the natural and eternal subject of history and, therefore, subtracted from the scrutiny and criticism of the historian. As Croce had noted already in 1918, nationalism had turned into a 'true doctrine of decadence', which 'offers no support for that criticism which is progress'.[100] The crisis of liberal principles was then also the crisis of what he termed the 'historical sense', produced by mistaking a historical and changing fact for a natural and enduring reality. Croce's later call, made in 1944, to 'denationalise history' in order to reinvigorate the struggle for freedom was perfectly consistent with his previous views.[101] Overcoming the assumption that the nation was the eternal actor in history he then saw as the first step in the quest for freedom, in a new form. Importantly, seeing in a possible European union the new embodiment of freedom itself, Croce was nonetheless adamant that the nation would remain a key element, since the past, and the national past too, inevitably lived on into the present: 'The French, Germans, Italians, and all others will rise to be Europeans, and their thoughts will turn to Europe, and their hearts will beat for it, as once they did for their smaller homelands, not forgotten already, but loved even more'.[102]

That Croce expressed such hopes in 1932, on the eve of Hitler's rise to power, might be perplexing, especially in light of the fears he had voiced about the 'European malady'. Years later, in 1944, he confessed to his friend and fellow historian, Adolfo Omodeo, that 'the dream of the United States of Europe' with which he had ended his *Storia d'Europa* was 'drifting away from the horizon'.[103] One can only speculate on what Croce would have thought about the ensuing integration process and the present state of Europe. He would admittedly have censured the rise of nationalism, just as he did in the 1930s and before. Yet, at the same time, he would have seen the struggle between nationalism and Europeanism as inherently positive – provided, of course, it did not lead to the outright denial of either. Most likely, he would have approved of the integration itself. But he would have done so precisely for the reasons its many detractors criticise it: because of the seemingly endless divisions and the struggle waged not only between its member states, but also between these and the Union's institutions, as well as between the various actors within the Union itself. The integration process he would have viewed for what it actually is, as an ongoing accomplishment, with no predetermined end result in view, and in which decisions are made according to changing

conditions both within Europe and globally. Imperfect, contingent, and temporary though it might be, Croce would have seen in it an expression of modern freedom – and precisely because of its imperfect, contingent, and temporary nature.

Notes

1. Gobetti, "Croce oppositore".
2. See, on this, Martina, *Croce giornalista*.
3. Benedetto Croce, "La situazione politica" (1924), in Croce, *Pagine sparse* (Naples: Ricciardi, 1943), ii. 377, and Croce, *Contributo alla critica di me stesso*, 88. The different parts of the *Contributo* were written between 1915 and 1950. An important step in the distancing from Fascism was the definitive break with Giovanni Gentile. See Benedetto Croce to Giovanni Gentile, 24 October 1924, in Croce, *Lettere a Giovanni Gentile (1896–1924)*, 670 and, even before then, Benedetto Croce, "Contro la troppa filosofia politica" (1923), in Croce, *Cultura e vita morale* (Bari: Laterza, 1955), 244–7. On the complex relationship between Croce and Italian Fascism, see Rizi, *Benedetto Croce and Italian Fascism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), and Di Rienzo, *Benedetto Croce*.
4. Gobetti, "Croce oppositore", 880. Emphasis added.
5. To gain a sense of Croce's European intellectual links, see Nicolini, *Croce*, 483–502, as well as Coli, *Croce, Laterza e la cultura europea*.
6. Benedetto Croce, "Preoccupazioni francesi" (1920), in Croce, *Pagine sparse*, ii. 326.
7. Garin, *Cronache di filosofia italiana*, i. 273. Also see Coli, *Croce, Laterza e la cultura europea*, especially 61–131.
8. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 275. For an earlier expression of Croce's attachment to the "moderate liberalism" of the Risorgimento, see Benedetto Croce, *I Poerio: Una famiglia di patrioti* (1919) (Milan: Adelphi, 2010), 34–60.
9. Sasso, "Benedetto Croce e il liberalismo (Considerazioni e appunti)", 10.
10. Benedetto Croce to Vittorio Enzo Alfieri, 10 October 1925, in Croce, *Lettere a Vittorio Enzo Alfieri*, 5; emphasis in the original. Also see Benedetto Croce, "Liberalismo e fascismo" (1923), in Croce, *Pagine sparse*, ii. 373.
11. Benedetto Croce, review of Guido De Ruggiero, *Storia del liberalismo europeo* (1925), 305.
12. Norberto Bobbio, "Benedetto Croce e il liberalismo" (1955), in Bobbio, *Politica e cultura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 265–8. Among other critics, see Sartori, *Stato e politica nel pensiero di Benedetto Croce*, 101–2, and, more recently, Salvadori, *Liberalismo italiano: I dilemmi della libertà*, 43–81, and Giuseppe Bedeschi, *Storia del pensiero liberale* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2015), 270–92. On Croce's distaste for that "pure philosophy", allegedly so detached from practical concerns, see for example Benedetto Croce, "Troppa filosofia" (1922), in Croce, *Cultura e vita morale*, 229–33. On Croce's "liberalism" there is an almost endless literature. See, among others: Bellamy, "Between Economic and Ethical Liberalism", 175–95; Musté, "Libertà e storicismo assoluto"; Girolamo Cotroneo, "Introduzione: Una teoria filosofica della libertà", in Benedetto Croce, *La religione della libertà: Antologia degli scritti politici* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2002), 17–102; Ocone, *Benedetto Croce*; Gennaro Sasso, "Benedetto Croce e il liberalismo", in Sasso, *Filosofia e idealismo: V – Secondi paralipomeni* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2007), 579–630; Cingari, *Dietro l'autonarrazione*, 264–77.
13. The text had first been published as "Il presupposto filosofico della concezione liberale", *Atti della Reale Accademia di scienze morali e politiche di Napoli*, 50 (1927), 3–12, and then, with its final title, in Croce, *Aspetti morali della vita politica*, 7–19. Some of the guiding principles of this text can already be found in Benedetto Croce, "Libertà e dovere" (1925), in Croce, *Cultura e vita morale*, 301–5. What is particularly striking in the latter text is the extent to which Croce was explicitly setting his ideas in opposition to those of fascist thinkers. Here, all references are taken from Benedetto Croce, "La concezione liberale come concezione della vita", in Croce, *Etica e politica*, 235–43.

14. Croce, "La concezione liberale come concezione della vita", 235–6.
15. Ibid., 241–2. For a discussion of Benedetto Croce as a representative figure of the "modern" intellectual and of his understanding of modernity itself, see Bellamy, "A Modern Interpreter".
16. Croce, "The Roots of Liberty", 28–9. The text was completed by Croce in January 1940: Croce, *Taccuini di lavoro*, iv. 196. It would later be published in Italian as "Principio, ideale, teoria: A proposito della teoria filosofica della libertà" (1940), in Croce, *Il carattere della filosofia moderna* (Bari: Laterza, 1963), 107–27.
17. Croce, "La concezione liberale come concezione della vita", 236.
18. Antonio Gramsci to Tatiana Schucht, 9 May 1932, in Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere*, 227. Also see Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ii. 1229.
19. Ugo D'Andrea, "La storia e la libertà", *Critica fascista*, 10/9 (1 May 1932), 169. Gramsci was aware of D'Andrea's review of Croce's *Storia d'Europa* and referred to it in his letter to Schucht.
20. Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, 48 and 50.
21. See Benedetto Croce, "La fine della civiltà" (1946) and "L'Anticristo che è in noi" (1946), both in Croce, *La fine della civiltà*, 13–30 and 33–46 respectively. Also see, with reference to the much-feared *finis Europae*: Benedetto Croce, 29 March 1944, in Croce, *Quando l'Italia era tagliata in due*, 95.
22. Benedetto Croce, "Appendice: Note autobiografiche, II', in Croce, *Contributo alla critica di me stesso*, 95. See, on this, Michele Ciliberto, "Malattia/sanità: Momenti della filosofia di Croce fra le due guerre", in Ciliberto, *Croce e Gentile*, 76, and Biagio de Giovanni, *Libertà e vitalità*, 19–20. For an overview of the complex place of ethics in Croce's philosophy: Bonetti, *L'etica di Croce*.
23. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 321. The first three chapters of the *Storia d'Europa* (though not this passage) were first published in 1931.
24. Croce, "La concezione liberale come concezione della vita", 239.
25. Benedetto Croce, "Politica 'in nuce'", in Croce, *Etica e politica*, 201. See, on these aspects, Girolamo Cotroneo, "Una scienza "empirica": La politica", in Cotroneo, *Benedetto Croce e altri ancora* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005), 63–82. Also see, on Croce's views on political parties more specifically, Carini, *Benedetto Croce e il partito politico*.
26. Benedetto Croce, "Il partito come giudizio e pregiudizio" (1912), in Croce, *Cultura e vita morale*, 197.
27. Other liberal thinkers of his day, including Gaetano Mosca, shared similar concerns about parties and "party morals": Gaetano Mosca, *Elementi di scienza politica* (1896) (Bari: Laterza, 1953), i. 240–90. In 1923, Croce very favourably reviewed the second edition of this book, so much so that from the third edition onwards his text was used as its preface.
28. On the debate, see Montanari, "Croce ed Einaudi", 704–11, and Desiderio, *Croce ed Einaudi: Teoria e pratica del liberalismo*.
29. Croce, "La concezione liberale come concezione della vita", 238.
30. Benedetto Croce, "Liberismo e liberalismo" (1927), in Croce, *Etica e politica*, 363.
31. Croce, *Introduzione ad una storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 55–6, later in Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 49.
32. Luigi Einaudi, "Liberalismo e liberismo" (1931), in Einaudi, *Il buongoverno* (Bari: Laterza, 1973), i. 228. But also see Luigi Einaudi, "Liberismo, borghesia e origini della guerra" (1928), in Einaudi, *Il buongoverno*, i. 196–218.
33. Wilhelm Röpke, "Liberismo e liberalismo: Benedetto Croce" (1962), in Röpke, *Scritti liberali* (Florence: Sansoni, 1974), 114.
34. Croce, "Liberismo e liberalismo", 364.
35. Croce, "La concezione liberale come concezione della vita", 236. An earlier if not full-blown expression of this is in Benedetto Croce, "Unità reale e unità panlogistica" (1924), in Croce, *Ultimi saggi*, 338–9; this text was a review of R.G. Collingwood's *Speculum Mentis or the Map of Knowledge* (1924).
36. Benedetto Croce, "Liberalismo" (1925), in Croce, *Cultura e vita morale*, 284–5.

37. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 20–1.
38. Antoni, *La restaurazione del diritto di natura*, 132. Also see Antoni, *Commento a Croce*, 99–110.
39. See, in particular, Croce, *Filosofia della pratica*. On the notion of the "individual" in Croce's works, see Maggi, *La filosofia di Benedetto Croce*, 59–102, and Musté, "Individuo e individualità nel pensiero di Croce".
40. Benedetto Croce, "Frammenti di etica: I trapassati" (1915), in Croce, *Etica e politica*, 25. Also see a much later text: Benedetto Croce, "Come si conosce la storia" (1949), in Croce, *Dieci conversazioni con gli alunni dell'Istituto Italiano di Studi Storici di Napoli*, 22.
41. Croce, *Filosofia della pratica*, 111–22.
42. Benedetto Croce, "Frammenti di etica: L'individuo, la Grazia e la Provvidenza" (1915), in Croce, *Etica e politica*, 93.
43. Croce, *Filosofia della pratica*, 114.
44. Ibid., 113–5; in French in the original.
45. Ibid., 49–50.
46. Ibid., 155.
47. Ibid., 115–6.
48. The book followed the publication of the *Estetica* (1902), *Filosofia della pratica*, and *Logica* (1909), completing Croce's tetralogy on Spirit. *Teoria e storia della storiografia* was first published in German in 1915. For the history of its publication, see Galasso, "Nota del curatore,"401–17.
49. The most important example, and indeed a very early one, is Giovanni Gentile, "Che cos'è il fascismo" (1925), in Gentile, *Politica e cultura* (Florence: Le lettere, 1990), i. 30–4.
50. Benedetto Croce, "Sul concetto d' 'individualità' nella storia della filosofia", in Croce, *Ultimi saggi*, 371–2.
51. See Croce, *Contributo alla critica di me stesso*, 73. This section of the *Contributo* was penned in 1941.
52. Benedetto Croce to Karl Vossler, 15 February 1928, in Croce and Vossler, *Carteggio: 1899–1949*, 328. Benedetto Croce, "Contrasti d'ideali politici dopo il 1870", in Croce, *Etica e politica*, 251–62, and Benedetto Croce, "Antistoricismo", in Croce, *Discorsi di Oxford: Antistoricismo e "Difesa della poesia"* (Rome: Treccani, 2023), 17–28. It is worth noting that most of the *Storia del Regno di Napoli* and the *Storia dell'età barocca* were first published in installments in *La critica* between 1923–1925 and 1924–1928, respectively. On Croce's historical works, see Federico Chabod, "Croce storico" (1952), in Chabod, *Lezioni di metodo storico* (Bari: Laterza, 1978), 179–253; Galasso, *Croce e lo spirito del suo tempo*, especially 367–85; Sasso, *Croce*. Also see, in English, Caponigri, *History and Liberty*. On his historical thought, see: Franchini, *La teoria della storia di Benedetto Croce*; Sasso, *Benedetto Croce*, 811–1008; Roberts, *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism*; Furnari Luvarà, *Tra arte e filosofia*; Mustè, "Logica e storia in Benedetto Croce".
53. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 433–4.
54. Walter Maturi, "Gli studi di storia moderna e contemporanea", i. 302. Also see Chabod, "Croce storico", 231. On Croce's ideas about Europe, see, among others: Matteucci, "Benedetto Croce e la crisi dell'Europa"; Lönne, "Lo spirito europeo di Benedetto Croce", 131–47; Michele Maggi, "Croce e l'Europa"; Galasso, "Benedetto Croce e l'unità europea"; Bedeschi, "Croce e l'Europa; Giuseppe Cacciatore, "Croce: L'idea di Europa tra crisi e trasformazione", in Cacciatore, *Filosofia pratica e filosofia civile nel pensiero di Benedetto Croce* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005), 131–58.
55. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, especially 301–23. Similar arguments were already contained in Croce's "Contrasti d'ideali politici dopo il 1870".
56. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 322.
57. See, on this, Sasso, *Benedetto Croce*, 600–8, and Cingari, *Benedetto Croce e la crisi della civiltà europea*, i. 306–7. Croce was borrowing and readapting the notions of *ergon* and *enérgeia* as presented by Wilhelm von Humboldt in his *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwickelung des Menschengeschlechts*, 41.

58. Croce, "The Roots of Liberty", 31–2.
59. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 17.
60. Piero Gobetti, "Illuminismo" (23 December 1924), in Gobetti, *Scritti storici, letterari e filosofici*, 600–2; Guido De Ruggiero, *Storia del liberalismo europeo* (1925) (Bari: Laterza, 2003), 1–69; Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 15–24; Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne (1680–1715)*; Franco Venturi, *Jeunesse de Diderot (1713–1753)* (1939) (Geneva: Slatkine, 1967). On this point, see Ferrone and Roche, *L'Illuminismo nella cultura contemporanea*, 59–67. Interesting arguments are also in Traverso, *L'histoire comme champ de bataille*, especially 59–125.
61. Sternhell, *Les Anti-Lumières*, in particular 446–57.
62. See, especially, Cotroneo, *Croce e l'Illuminismo*; Nuzzo, "Il 'giovane' Croce e l'Illuminismo, and Imbruglia, "Benedetto Croce and the Problem of Enlightenment".
63. Croce, *Logica come scienza del concetto puro*, 341.
64. Croce, *La filosofia di Giambattista Vico*, e.g. 76. Benedetto Croce, "Contro il secolo decimottavo" (1916), in Croce, *L'Italia dal 1914 al 1918: Pagine sulla guerra* (Bari: Laterza, 1928), 107–10. A later instance is in Benedetto Croce, "Storia economico-politica e storia etico-politica" (1924), in Croce, *Etica e politica*, 229.
65. Croce, *Logica come scienza del concetto puro*, 13–25. See, on this, Michele Maggi, "La logica di Croce", in Maggi, *La logica di Croce e altri scritti* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1994), 13–42 and, more specifically on Croce's notion of "pseudo-concepts", Cingari, *Benedetto Croce e la crisi della civiltà europea*, i. 58–77.
66. Benedetto Croce, "Per la storia della filosofia politica" (1924), in Croce, *Etica e politica*, 209–10.
67. See, on this, Croce, *Filosofia della pratica*, 317–27 and Benedetto Croce, "Contro l'astrattismo e il materialismo politici" (1912), in Croce, *L'Italia dal 1914 al 1918*, 29–38.
68. Croce, *Logica come scienza del concetto puro*, 288.
69. Croce, "Per la storia della filosofia politica", 210–1.
70. Ibid., 211–2. It is worth noting that, in a late 1949 essay, Croce partially revised this position through a Kantian move: Benedetto Croce, "Una pagina sconosciuta degli ultimi mesi della vita di Hegel", in Croce, *Indagini su Hegel e schiarimenti filosofici* (Bari: Laterza, 1952), 3–28.
71. Cotroneo, *Croce e l'Illuminismo*, 22.
72. Benedetto Croce, review of Volrico Travaglini, *Il concetto di capitalismo* (1937), in Croce, *Nuove pagine sparse* (Bari: Laterza, 1966), ii. 245.
73. Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, 71.
74. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 148–9.
75. Benedetto Croce, "La pretesa rivendicazione del Settecento", in Croce, *Conversazioni critiche* (Bari: Laterza, 1951), v. 234.
76. See Imbruglia, "Benedetto Croce and the Problem of Enlightenment", 102–8.
77. Croce, *La filosofia di Giambattista Vico*, 144.
78. Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, 277. Still in 1947 Croce censured the "intolerance" of Enlightenment thinkers towards "the past": Benedetto Croce, "Lo storicismo e la rivoluzione mentale dell'età moderna", in Croce, *Filosofia e storiografia*, 163.
79. Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, 98. Also see, Croce, *Storia della storiografia italiana nel secolo decimonono* (1921), i. 1–20.
80. Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, 270.
81. Ibid., 92 and 98.
82. Croce, *Filosofia della pratica*, 158.
83. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 108–13.
84. Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, 290.
85. See, for example, the arguments by the "neo-Enlightenment" thinker, Nicola Abbagnano, in his "L'ultimo Croce e il soggetto della storia", in Abbagnano, *Possibilità e libertà* (Turin: Taylor, 1956), 240.
86. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 57.

87. Ibid., 57–61. Such a distinction was already criticised by Guido De Ruggiero in his *L'età del Romanticismo* (1943) (Bari: Laterza, 1968), ii. 349–52. On Croce's ideas about Romanticism, see Manni, "La critica di Benedetto Croce al 'Sistema romantico'".
88. The latter point brings to mind the arguments in Praz, *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*, a book published shortly before the *Storia d'Europa*. On the differences between Croce and Praz's views, see: Mori, "Il fascino della malattia".
89. In fact, Croce completed his paper while drafting the *Storia d'Europa*: Sasso, *Per invigilare me stesso*, 110–4. On Croce's "Antistoricismo", see Giammattei, "Croce, Oxford 1930", and Rossella Faraone, "Benedetto Croce e l'antistoricismo", and Sasso, "Nota".
90. Croce, "Antistoricismo", 17.
91. Ibid., 18.
92. Ibid., 23–5.
93. Calabrò, *L'Europa di Croce*, 60.
94. Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, 34.
95. Ibid., 37. On this point, Croce returned later on, in response to criticisms made by Guido De Ruggiero: Benedetto Croce, "Indagine storica e risoluzione morale" (11 February 1946), *La nuova Europa*, 2/6 (1946), 9. Also see De Ruggiero, *Il ritorno della ragione*, 30–41.
96. Benedetto Croce, "La storia tra le storie: La storia etico-politica", in Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, 374.
97. José Ortega y Gasset, "Ante el movimiento social: IV – Antiliberalismo", in Ortega y Gasset, *Obras Completas* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1946–1983), x. 594. On Croce and Ortega y Gasset, see De Gennaro, "Croce e Ortega y Gasset".
98. Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, 301–2.
99. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 23.
100. Benedetto Croce, "Nazionalismo sensuale e nazionalismo spirituale", in Croce, *L'Italia dal 1914 al 1918*, 193.
101. Benedetto Croce, "Snazionalizzare la storia", in Croce, *La mia filosofia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1993), 316–8.
102. Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, 435–6.
103. Benedetto Croce to Adolfo Omodeo, 20 November 1944, in Croce and Omodeo, *Carteggio*, 216–7.

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