

Italian history and European history: Italian historiography in the interwar period

In the 1920s and 1930s the European historians have addressed the issue of an European history on various occasions and for a variety of reasons. These are too many to be accounted for in detail. The trauma of the first world war, with its inter-European global warfare, had indeed dissolved the eighteenth-century idea of a collective progress of the European culture out of a rich diversity of social, political, religious peculiarities¹. Pirenne was the most outspoken witness of this shift of accent: as a prisoner of war in Germany in 1917 and 1918, he began to write a history of Europe that he did not complete. Its first part, published posthumously in 1936, was based on a sharp distinction between Eastern and Western Europe. In doing so Pirenne reiterated his approach to the history of the Mediterranean sea in the Middle Ages (Mahomet et Charlemagne): he added a distinct note of personal experience and an explicit desire to make sense of his life through the investigation of the past. According to Pirenne, Western Europe was quintessentially bourgeois, capitalist, market-oriented, and anti-authoritarian. Eastern Europe, that to Pirenne was almost identical with Germany, was on the contrary dominated by discipline, submission to hierarchy, and blind trust in god-given political power since the 16th century. Different values and life styles, loyalties and identities were attached to these two parts of Europe, whose history Pirenne could not (or did not want to) write in its early modern and modern developments. Pirenne was by no means alone in superimposing existential meanings to the idea of Europe. The idea of Europe and European history in particular became controversial issues after the end of the world, more than they were so before the war broke out. The idea of Europe became closely associated with the idea of crisis and took on the meaning of a defence against those enemies that were threatening the core of human values that the European states could hardly sustain after the war had brought about a clear decline in the European state-system and the United States and later the Soviet Union had emerged as key players in the world politics. Europe became therefore a template for political action in the near future and a slogan that would serve first of all as an alternative to the communist call for a worldwide revolution of the proletarians. Trocki was conspicuously alone in 1914 in arguing for a United States of Europe as a basis for an organisation of the United States of the World from a communist perspective. How fragile the notion of Europe was in the 1930 was expressed by Marc Bloch in a well-known review for the *Annales* in 1933 in which he flatly stated that “the notion of Europe is a notion of crisis, a notion of fear” and implied that a revolt of the colonies would sentence the European countries to death. Considering the later development of European political and cultural history, Bloch was indeed right in pointing to this side of the notion of Europe in the interwar period. It would nonetheless overstretch his point to consider the whole discussion about Europe in the historical writing of those years as a consequence of a sense of crisis.

From a political concern over the future of the continent, no matter where its boundaries were imagined to lie, many historians felt called upon to narrate the origins of Europe. Their hope was to find in the past a clear and unambiguous answer to the political problems of their age. Those who engaged themselves in the inquiry about the history of Europe never really doubted its real existence. I will not expand on these works, written by medievalists, like Christopher Dawson, 1933, *Making of Europe*, or Cecil Delisle Burns, *The First Europe: Study of the Establishment of Medieval Christendom*, in search of the common roots in religious homogeneity, or by historians with an interest in general history, writing for the general public, like Herbert Fisher, and Charles Seignobos, who published the *Essai d'une histoire comparée des peuples de l'Europe*, 1938. In most cases, clearly so in Dawson's numerous books, for instance, the Christian heritage was highlighted as the crucial factor in the European continuity from the decline of the Roman empire to the present. The stress on the positive role played by the Catholic Church in preserving the European features according to these books clearly articulated the desire of a super-national agency neutralizing the

¹ Stuart Woolf, *Europe and its Historians*, *Contemporary European History*, 2002 (12:3), pp. 323-337; Marcello Verga, *Storie d'Europa. Secoli XVIII-XXI*, Roma, Carocci 2004.

expansive policies of the national states. Europe, whatever its boundaries were, was not the only unit that historians were looking for as an appropriate framework for their researches. The importance of the notion of Eastern Europe, as clearly distinct from the *Mitteleuropa* Friedrich Naumann have been talking about, was argued by Halecki in 1923, at the International congress of historical sciences. Some years later Braudel started his research on the 16th century placing the Mediterranean sea as the focus of his narrative. The competitive interaction between historical categories such as nation, Europe, region, and the sea spaces characterized the development of the historical writing in Europe in the interwar period. What follows is a brief presentation of this development in the Italian historical writing in the interwar period: a period, it must be stressed, that is now undergoing a radical rethinking in the research.

The Italian historiography in the 1920s and 1930s became interested in the notion of a European history out a very peculiar approach to history in general. It is well-known that the process of national unification was accomplished against the claims of the Catholic Church of being both a universal religious agency and a territorial state rooted in the Italian history and in the Italian society. Writing national history after 1870 was therefore a difficult task as it urged to devise a teleological process in the political development while denying the legitimacy of the catholic church as a territorial power. Besides the strident opposition to the catholic church, a national history of Italy had to come to terms with the apparent disproportion between the aspirations the patriots in the 19th century had nurtured and the sobering reality of the post-1870 Italian state: a country still on the threshold of the industrial revolution, with vast areas of dramatic economic backwardness, a country whose international status was generally low and sometimes put into question by its more powerful partners, very much to the humiliation of the Italian political leaders and public intellectuals. Discomfort and frustration emerged among the historians prior to the first world war who compared the Italian and European history and found fault with the actual development of the Italian history itself. While the German historians were arguing that Germany had gone its own way, cultivating *Kultur*, the Italian historians were wondering if the Italian way of coming into political age was right and were giving alternatives a serious thought. Again, I will not enter into a detailed presentation of these works, rather analyse some major books that dealt with the history of Europe in its relationship with the Italian history.

Europe was not a popular notion in Italy in the 1920s and even more so in the 1930s. An emotional tie to the roman heritage was more appropriate: “*romanità*” was the tradition Italians had to stick to, and that implied a tacit, sometimes explicit rejection of Europe as this was the notion that absorbed French and British ways of life, strategies in foreign politics and moral values. “*Antieuropa*” was the title of a fascist review that published articles criticizing the bourgeois and plutocratic ideals and exalting the nascent fascist empire in Africa. The nation and the national state were indeed the focus of the pro-fascist historiography: given the unclear relations fascism had with the interpretation of the Italian recent past, these notion had be reinterpreted and if necessary twisted and stretched to accommodate the revolutionary momentum embedded in the fascist rhetoric. The standard was set by the most prominent fascist historian, Gioacchino Volpe, who published a history of Italy under the title of “*Italy on the march*”: the title evokes a military effort, a silent struggle against all odds. Europe was a background to the inebriating progress of the Italian people to what had been called a “*place in the sunshine*”, a position adequate to their history, demography and culture. Geographical boundaries were not decisive in Volpe’s approach to the nation: rather, it was an ethnic and spiritual unity, forged during the 19th century in the fight with Austria and recreated in a conscious mimicking of the Italian past greatness as a key figure in universal history. Regional peculiarities were obstacles to be overcome, or contributions to the common good: but the main thrust was on Italy as a whole, the accomplishment of a long march, as it were, or on macroregions: northern and southern Italy, whose demographic surplus provoked the dramatic waves of emigration of the Italian population around the turn of the century: from Southern Italy to North America, from northern Italy to Latin America. The biological dimension of the population mass was to Volpe the core of world politics. The drift towards the African coast was the natural outcome of the

demographic growth: politics meant interpreting the biological movements of the population, and war and peace depended upon the balance of population and economy. In the 1900s, a key moment in Volpe's narrative, the new prosperity of the country gave a free rein to dreams of an aggressive policy on the international arena, that Volpe welcomed: what he called the "sense of national life" (95) grew stronger and the idea that life is sacred but that the individual lives are less important than the collective goal of the nation's greatness. Italy would play its role in the Mediterranean arena, not in continental Europe, that was no match for the Italian ambitions. The geopolitical unit of Volpe's vision was therefore the peninsula and northern Africa: the conjunction of an Italian territory with the shores of the continent just across the sea, that thanks to their upward movement and their demographic progress Italians were entitled to take and exploit as a legitimate possession for themselves. Volpe himself did not write about Africa specifically, but published in the 1930s a history of Corsica that he claimed to Italy for ethnic and linguistic reasons and as obvious part of a greater Italy to be built in the next future. The Italian studies on Africa, its history and cultures, is still an underresearched topic: yet, it is clear that starting at the latest in 1906, with the foundation of the Italian colonial Institute, a state-driven inquiry into Africa articulated an interest in the colonisation of the continent that mirrored the strategy of the Italian government from the liberal giolittiani to Mussolini. The historiographical outcome has been quite irrelevant, but the impact has been remarkable on the notion of Italian history. Volpe showed that once the unification of Italy had been achieved reaching the geographical limits of the peninsula, Italian history entered into a new stage of development, in which the power of the political leaders would play a key role in creating for Italy a new geographical framework: not Europe, but the Mediterranean sea as a bridge to Africa. The basically antieuropean bias of fascism has already been mentioned. I may come as a surprise that in 1932 the royal academy of Italy, the most prominent of all Italian cultural institutions, and unflinchingly aligned with the cultural policy of Mussolini, organised an international conference on Europe. Volpe was the secretary general of the Italian royal academy, but did not deliver a paper on that occasion. An analysis of the papers and of the political constellation that presided over it would be interesting indeed: Mussolini and Goering were present, together with among the others Sanchez-Albornoz, Roberto Michels, Werner Sombart. Most historians who had been invited did not show up: Meinecke and Brandi, Menendez Pidal among the others. Politicians set the tone of the idea of Europe: the nucleus of an expanding and fluid shift of power from the great national states to the rest of world. Alfred Rosenberg summed up this approach telling the participants sitting in the austere hall of the Italian academy that Europe stands between Asia and Africa and must dare to take possession of those territories that are required by its population and that, on the other hand, will never reach the stage of being a full-fledged state. Europe must be united only in allowing reciprocally the expansion that fitted the interests of each of the four major "cultural states": Great Britain, Germany, France and Italy². The political agenda was clear: and the fascist government aimed at joining at last the three major powers in the enlargement of Europe's boundaries. Disproportion of size and effectiveness did not deter the Italian leaders, both political and intellectual, from arguing along the lines sketched in the proceedings of the Roman conference. According to the fascist historians the Italian specificity prevailed on the common ground pertaining to Europe. Ambiguities were frequent: none was as ambiguous and ambivalent as Cantimori, one of the leading Italian historians before and after the war and a close associate of Volpe and Gentile. In a avowedly fascist vein, he stressed in 1929 that the Italian character was the least americanized and the least "numbed by the Asiatic opium" among the European nations and that keeping alive the purity of its character was the best possible contribution to the European achievements, prominent among them the state and the family. But, some years later, Cantimori started an innovative research about the heretical sects born out the reformation movement that spread the rationalism of the Italian humanism across Europe. In this book the notion of Europe and the relations of Italy to the rest of the continent took on a very different meaning, and the

² Rosenberg, *Krisis und Neugeburt Europa*, Roma, Reale Accademia d'Italia 1932, p. 12.

continent was seen as the playground of the struggle of dogmatism and spiritual authority against the free use of reason. The Italian contribution to Europe was therefore of a very different kind than stubbornly resisting foreign influences and could be interpreted only as a stage in the progress of the universal value of unrestrained inquiry.

The unambiguous paradigm of an alternative view on the geo-political framework of Italian history was provided by Benedetto Croce. Volpe's *Italia in cammino* (Italy on the march) was published in 1927. One year later Croce published the *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915* (History of Italy from 1871 to 1915), the reply from the liberal perspective to Volpe's authoritarian nationalism. In 1932 Croce published the book that is relevant in this context: *La storia d'Europa nel secolo XIX* (History of Europe in the 19th century). Croce reversed the perspective that was usual in previous historical writing, focused as this was on the common elements that united and gave meaning to the political components of Europe. Instead of focusing exclusively on the process of national unification in the 19th century and on the different ways in which the heterogeneous parts of the peninsula were brought together, Croce based his narrative on the "religion of liberty": by which he meant both the birth of a liberal movement in Europe and the awareness that the course of history should best be narrated as the incremental achievement of political conditions conducive to liberty. Absolutist governments and the catholic church played the role of the enemies of the religion of liberty, acknowledged as necessary but contingent factors in the dialectical progress of liberty. The *History of Europe* is a multilayered work, at the same time a clear political manifesto against fascism, a philosophy of history displaying the hidden sense of events that might look disconnected, and a narrative of the crucial turning point in the European culture (and possibly an autobiography of Croce himself³). The idea of liberty worked as a value that assessed the vitality of collective movements and political and intellectual leaders across Europe. Even the socialist movement, something Croce had distanced himself from early in his life, was interpreted in 1932 in positive terms as an unintentional and significant contribution to the progress of the religion of liberty. For our purpose it is relevant to stress that Croce was seeing the Italian history as a part of a bigger picture. Croce had argued previously that a circulation of ideas takes place in the history of the philosophical thought. In this book he addressed the issue of narrating the widening circle of liberty and the transformations this process entailed; my favourite passage about this being the paragraph devoted by Croce to the decline of sentiments and intelligence and the growth of cult of the physical energy in the 1870s, in which a significant role is played by "what was called the sport, by the bicycles and cars, boats and yachts and water-planes (check *idronavi*), boxing and football and sky" (413). This a surprising funny example of Croce's effort to detect transformations affecting the different levels of life in all Europe, irrespective of the national settings and to some extent at least of the national traditions. In his *History of Europe* the European 19th century was the cornerstone of universal history, as liberty in its European version was placed at the centre of the universal history of the past and of future. Its eclipse from the outbreak of World War I was he implicit assumption of Croce's work. Deeply antinationalist and antidictatorial as it was, the *history of Europe* was greeted as an evidence that national histories were not the only way do make sense of the recent past, and that the state-building and nation-building were not the only processes to be accounted for in a global history.

Croce and Volpe set paradigms in books that are empirical enough to be accepted as history books and theoretical enough to defy current assumptions and promote new and fresh research. While the political outlook implied in these works was clear to all Italian and foreign readers, in historiographical terms the use of both Croce and Volpe turned out to be rather a matter of careful combination and selection of motifs than clear-cut acceptance or rejection. Croce inspired respect also in political opponents for his staunch stance against Mussolini, Volpe was immensely powerful in the cultural institutions of the regime and based his prestige as an historian on his excellent medieval studies. Both personalities attracted the best young historians of their generations. The

³ Galasso, 451-2, edizione Adelphi della storia.

notions of nation, Europe and Mediterranean Sea renewed by Croce's and Volpe's studies appear prominently in their studies devoted to the recent Italian history. The international context of the late 1920s and early 1930s had a strong influence of the young historians' approach to history writing: the economic crisis of 1929 especially in the United States, the collapse of the Weimar republic, the growing weakness of the Society of Nations that gave Italy and Germany free way to a drastic revision of the Versailles treaty. It was hard to combine compelling historiographical paradigms with the realities of international politics and the widespread ambition to carve out niches of intellectual autonomy under the protection of an authoritarian regime. Young historians like Sestan, Maturi and above all Chabod tried to walk on the thin ice of a revision of the meaning nation, Europe and the Mediterranean Sea. These three historians became prominent in the 1930s and were recognized as the leading professors of modern history in the 1940s and 1950s. Chabod became the editor of the *Rivista Storica Italiana* and the president of the international society of historians, organising as such a memorable congress in Rome in 1955. In the 1930s the fall of Mussolini lay far ahead and none of them was really interested in making it likely or inevitable. The risks one had to take in revising these crucial notions were clear: the major cultural enterprise of fascism, the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, conceived by Gentile, published in 1932 the volume that included the entry Europe. It is a touchstone of what was officially expected regarding the interpretation of Europe. At first, in 1929, Omodeo was asked to write this essay: Omodeo became the closest associate of Croce and Volpe, who was responsible of the historical section of the *Encyclopedia*, charged Sestan to write the entry Europe. Sestan did not deny the existence of a European unity in morals and religions, that reminded of course of the religious and cultural role played by Italy. But he denied that there could be more to it than that. Since the end of the XV century there was no common economic life, no similarities between the state institutions. The emergence of the nation states was the central feature of this Europe, that was kept together by the ceaseless wars. In 1940 Sestan once again wrote about Europe in a historical perspective for the National fascist Party, that sponsored a *Dictionary of Politics*. His answer to the question "What is Europe" was unequivocal. Europe is a myth, has no substantial content. It is not a form of civilisation, because civilisation implies a racial homogeneity that is not there in the European history. For Sestan, who revised his outlook after the war, Europe was an intractable category. Maturi, his friend and colleague, was engaged in those same years in assessing Italy's role in the 19th century. Maturi acknowledged the role of power politics in the international arena and stressed that France and Italy could never share the same objectives in the Mediterranean sea, because "the human, historical and geographical destiny (*fatalità*)" prevents it. Maturi made room for notion of balance of power and political strategy: self-regulation of the great powers was a crucial factor in order to provide peace and welfare to the European area. While he stressed the peculiarity of the Italian national movement, Europe provided the conditions for it to develop and achieve its goal. Without a balance of powers among France, Great Britain and Germany in the 1860s and 1870s, so Maturi, the national unification would have been out of question: the European politics, rather than a European civilisation, made Italy possible.

It was extremely difficult to find a position that was acceptable from the points of view of the historical sciences and the political legitimacy. Sestan and Maturi oscillated between Croce and Volpe: Sestan was clearly rather inclined to accept the racial implications of Volpe's narrative, Maturi was more responsive to the European framework designed by Croce.

In the 1930s Federico Chabod was beginning a stunning academic career that was not obstructed by the fall of fascism, the war, the foundation of the republic. In the 1930s and early 1940s he performed the amazing metamorphosis from being the most trusted collaborator of Volpe and a professor of medieval and modern history at what was officially called the Fascist Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Perugia, founded in 1927, to being in the winter 1943-44 the professor of medieval and modern history in Milano, then under the German occupation, and at the same time the chief commander of the resistance against Mussolini's and Hitler's armies in the Aosta valley. More deeply than any other historian in the 30s and 40s Chabod addressed the issue of

the relation between nation, Europe and the opportunities the Mediterranean Sea had been giving to Italy. Again Volpe and Croce, both held in very high esteem by Chabod, stood in the background of Chabod's writings. In 1935 Chabod delivered the inaugural lecture of his chair in Perugia and chose the topic of the essence of Europe. It was a very carefully worded text, paying due respect to the Fascist foreign policy. But in terms of his historical interpretation Chabod was very clear about one point: that the balance of power emerged in the early modern and modern period as the main feature of the European history, that the balance of power indeed changed according to the historical processes that took place, the formation of the national states most prominent among them, and that it was a fluid and flexible equilibrium. But Chabod made the statement that Europe was an unity, where the different parts had an interest in preserving the balance of power among them and that this interdependence was a truly unique feature of Europe: sharing common interest made it a European civilisation, different from the rest of the world because it rested on the balance of different elements.