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RECENSIONI

FABIO F. RIZI

*BENEDETTO CROCE AND THE BIRTH OF THE ITALIAN REPUBLIC
1943-1952*

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This book is the second of Fabio Rizi's two-volume account of Benedetto Croce's participation in, and important contribution to, Italian political life over a period of more than forty years. In the preceding volume (*Benedetto Croce and Italian Fascism*, Toronto: UTP Press, 2003), Rizi traced Croce's political involvement, begun in the period that preceded Italy's entry into the First World War with his appointment to the senate in 1910. This was followed by a brief tenure as minister of education under Giovanni Giolitti in 1920-1921. The post WWI years saw the emergence of new political forces that shook the social and political system that had been in place since unification. Through the rise of Benito Mussolini in 1922, the elections of 1924, in which the Fascist Party won a crushing majority in parliament, Croce maintained an attitude, in Rizi's words, of "critical benevolence". His treatment of this period provides a plausible rationale for Croce's position, essentially based on the belief that the excesses of Mussolini's black shirts could be reined in by parliamentary discipline if the fascists shared political power. The constitution would hold, he thought, under the watchful eye of the king. And the appointment to the cabinet of Giovanni Gentile, his close collaborator in the periodical *La Critica*, he saw as an additional safeguard. This was a "fatal mistake" by Croce, as he himself came to realize. It was a mistake he shared with the liberal elites, and was compounded by the equally fatal miscalculation of the opposition's Aventine Secession after the murder of the socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti. Albeit too late, Croce soon after began a continuous, intense and "resolute opposition" marked by the publication of his Anti-Fascist Manifesto of June 1925, as a response to Gentile's Fascist Manifesto.

In this book Rizi resumes the narrative, starting with the dramatic and tragic events of 1943 to Croce's death in 1952. The fact that Croce's unstinting efforts at the time would afterwards often be misinterpreted, when not purposely misrepresented through "ideological bias or ignorance of the record" is a point Rizi confronts time and again with an impressive amount of documentary support. He succeeds in this by relating the story of Croce's intense political activities while at the same time referencing their connection with the scholarly pursuits to which he continued to apply himself, even in this time of turmoil. The reader is therefore often presented with a clearer understanding of the relationship between Croce's writings and the thinking and decisions taken in the political arena.

Rizi is particularly effective in providing a virtually daily account of the crucial period from July 25, 1943, when Mussolini was removed from power, to the formation of the first Badoglio government, the subsequent signing of the Armistice with the Allies, and to King Victor Emmanuel's flight from Rome in September. Croce became a key public figure who emerged from the wreckage of the war with an unblemished international anti-fascist profile and reputation. To the end of the war in Italy in May 1945, with the country in disarray, Rizi shows, he played a crucial role, sought by allied generals and diplomats who trusted his advice in the attempts to patch together a semblance of order from the disintegration of the old institutions. Rizi brings a great deal of clarity to this period with a carefully documented chronology of events, focusing on Croce's constant efforts to bring together representatives of political parties that had been scattered, jailed, or exiled, and were now slowly returning. Looking forward to the end of hostilities, the leaders of the Socialist Party, the Popular Party, and the Communist Party were now resurfacing after years of underground activity. New forces too, such as the *Partito d'Azione*, claimed their right to take their place and contribute to the rebuilding of the nation, a herculean task when considering their often contrasting objectives and the pressures and different interests of American, British and Soviet leaders. For Croce, events brought home the realization that little of the old order, founded on the Liberal tradition of the Risorgimento, would remain in place, since the elites that had made it possible, had failed the test of history. And the monarchy, which he had trusted, had discredited itself. There was no doubt in his mind that Victor Emmanuel, as the prime enabler of Mussolini's rise to power, had to resign. For a time the question of the monarchy's survival hinged on whether the king's son Umberto was up to the task. The latter soon demonstrated that he was not, a conclusion that was painfully arrived at by Croce, who had to conclude that the present royals had not inherited the virtues of the forefathers.

Though not in direct communication with the top allied leaders, Croce's ideas and proposals were brought to their attention and taken into serious account. This did not always produce the desired effects, as Rizi's detailed account of the critical period from 8 September 1943 to the end of the war in

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June 1944 and beyond makes clear. His tireless efforts to bring about a new and viable democracy from the ruins of fascist rule and humiliation by bringing together political forces like Communists, Socialists, Christian Democrats, and the *Partito d'Azione* that had distinguished itself in the partisan struggle, did, however, succeed in laying the foundations of the Italy that emerged after the war. In the process, however, it became clear to Croce that the mass appeal of parties such as the communists and the catholics threatened his own Liberal Party with irrelevance. This was a particularly bitter realization for Croce, whose whole being was steeped in the tradition and in the very spirit of the Risorgimento. Despite this, he continued to lead it until almost the end of his life.

As he did in his previous book on Croce, Rizi brings to bear an impressive amount of research on this exceptionally detailed account of the period and of Croce's role in it. Not only has he made use of every conceivable book by and about Croce, he has also consulted what seems to be every historical reference on the period, and every memoir and piece of private correspondence by the people who had some connection with events. Nothing relevant seems to have been missed. Special mention must be made of the invaluable use Rizi makes of the Diaries (*Taccuini di Lavoro*), and the Work Diaries (*Taccuini di Lavoro*) in which Croce summarized and commented on the day's meetings, people seen, work done or planned, and in which he expressed his deepest personal thoughts.

There is much to admire in these two books for readers who may have only (!) known Croce as the philosopher of the *Estetica*, as the author of books like the *Storia d'Italia*, or as the observer and recorder of Italian literary and cultural life in *La Critica*. Rizi has now given us added reasons for celebrating Croce as one of the founders of the modern Italian state.
