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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*

Sciara, G. (2022). The genesis of Bobbio's liberalism (1939-1955): between classics old and new. JOURNAL OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES, 27(3), 250-269 [10.1080/13569317.2022.2129214].

*Availability:*

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/906534> since: 2022-11-23

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2022.2129214>

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**Giuseppe Sciara (2022): The genesis of Bobbio's liberalism (1939-1955): between classics old and new, Journal of Political Ideologies, 27 (3): 250-269**

The final published version is available online at:

**<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2022.2129214>**

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## *The genesis of Bobbio's liberalism (1939-1955): between classics old and new*

Giuseppe Sciara

Norberto Bobbio dealt with liberalism at different stages of his career as an academic. Highlighting the development and evolution of his thought over several decades would therefore require a commitment that would go far beyond the space I have at my disposal. In the case of Bobbio, a reconstruction of the historical-political context is always necessary, in order to understand the practical and political reasons which led him to research on certain issues in different seasons of the Italian cultural debate. For this reason, I decided to focus on the “genetic” phase of his research on liberalism, which can be placed over a period of about fifteen years: from the end of the 1930s, when, under the influence of Benedetto Croce and in the face of the experience of totalitarianism he began to pose the theoretical problem of freedom, until 1955, the year in which he published *Politica e cultura (Politics and Culture)*<sup>1</sup>, one of his most fortunate volumes, conceived from the need, in the new context of the Cold War, to initiate a dialogue with the communist world.

I will reconstruct Bobbio's approach to liberalism through the theoretical confrontation he developed with some reference authors. As it is well known, it was Bobbio himself, in the *Autobiografia intellettuale (Intellectual Autobiography)* that introduced the bibliography of his writings<sup>2</sup> – a text later taken up in the volume *De senectute*<sup>3</sup> – who listed “his” favorite authors. Among the first five we find those whom he considered “the greatest political philosophers of the modern age”: Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel. The other five, the “contemporaries” Croce, Cattaneo, Kelsen, Pareto and Weber, were listed on the basis of a purely chronological criterion relating to the moment in which he approached them in the course of his life<sup>4</sup>. There is no doubt that among these authors the one who contributed most to the formation of Bobbio's conception of liberalism, also because he was the one who most marked the years of his formation, was Benedetto Croce. Locke and Kant, who can also be ascribed to the liberal current, interested Bobbio more as exponents of natural law than as liberal thinkers and Bobbio deepened their work at a subsequent stage of his intellectual path respect to the one I will consider in this essay.

<sup>1</sup> N. Bobbio, *Politica e cultura* (Torino: Einaudi, 1955).

<sup>2</sup> N. Bobbio, ‘Autobiografia intellettuale’, in N. Bobbio, *Bibliografia degli scritti di Norberto Bobbio, 1934-1993*, ed. by C. Violi (Roma-Bari: Laterza 1995), pp. V-XIX.

<sup>3</sup> N. Bobbio, ‘Per una bibliografia’, in N. Bobbio, *De senectute e altri scritti autobiografici* (Torino: Einaudi, 1996), pp. 81-93.

<sup>4</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 86. On Bobbio and the classics’ lesson see M. Bovero, ‘Introduzione’, in N. Bobbio, *Teoria generale della politica*, ed. by M. Bovero (Torino: Einaudi, 1999), pp. XXIII-XXXIII.

Alongside Croce, however, two other authors in my opinion strongly influenced the first phase of Bobbio's research on liberalism. The first, Karl Popper, was certainly not a "classic" of liberalism when Bobbio "imported" his work *The Open Society and its Enemies* to Italy in the months following the Liberation, but he would become so later, during the second half of the 20th century. The second author is Benjamin Constant, whose thought significantly marked many of the essays collected in *Politics and Culture*. Thanks to and starting from Constant, Bobbio anticipated as early as 1954 the famous distinction between negative and positive liberty developed by another author whom we now consider a "classic" of liberalism, Isaiah Berlin.

In the first part, I will briefly reconstruct the path of Bobbio from the years of his liberal formation, which took place in the sign of the works of Croce, to the first gradual departure from the Crocian concept of freedom during the years of the Resistance, thanks also to the militancy in the Action Party. In the second part, I will show that immediately after the Liberation of Italy from the Nazi-Fascist occupation and after the end of the Second World War, also thanks to the encounter with Popper's work, Bobbio's arrival to the methodological individualism took place as well as the definitive departure from the idealistic and Crocian conception of freedom. In the third part, I will reconstruct the systematic criticism that Bobbio, immediately after Croce's death (1952), addressed to his conception of liberalism. This criticism, developed in particular in one of the essays collected in the volume *Politics and culture*, is crucial to understand what the philosophical foundations of liberalism are according to Bobbio. Finally, in the fourth part, I will reconstruct the interpretation he gave of Constant's thought in *Politics and culture*: an interpretation closely intertwined with the political-practical objectives that Bobbio pursued in that period and fundamental to highlight the particularity and, in some ways, the anomaly of his liberalism.

### ***1. Bobbio and the progressive detachment from Benedetto Croce's idea of freedom: from his youth to militancy in the Action Party***

Bobbio's first encounter with the liberal tradition took place thanks to the works of Benedetto Croce, undoubtedly the classic to which he dedicated "the greatest number of writings and with greater continuity" in the course of his career<sup>5</sup>. In 1977, celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Croce's death, Bobbio wrote: «in these fifty years I have never stopped reading and rereading. In this sense, I believe, I am right to speak of my personal anniversary. I read and reread Croce on the most diverse occasions. For example, to draw inspiration. [...] A lesson that lasted fifty years. Therefore, Croce as a Master»<sup>6</sup>. On several occasions, Bobbio affirmed that he belonged to the third "Crocian"

<sup>5</sup> N. Bobbio, 'Il nostro Croce', in M. Ciliberto and C. Vasoli (Eds), *Filosofia e cultura. Per Eugenio Garin* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1991), vol. II, p. 790. On the relationship between Bobbio and Croce's thought and figure see F. Torchiani, 'L'odore di eresia: Norberto Bobbio, Luigi Russo e l'eredità di Croce', *L'acropoli*, 10 (2009), pp. 455-470; F. Manni, 'Il Croce di Norberto Bobbio', *Reset*, 25 (2010), pp. 79-84; F. Manni, 'Norberto Bobbio e Benedetto Croce', in I. Pozzoni (Ed.), *Benedetto Croce. Teoria e Orizzonti* (Milano: Limina Mentis, 2010), pp. 229-279.

<sup>6</sup> N. Bobbio, 'Un maestro di questo secolo', *L'Opinione*, I, 178 (1977), p. 3; then republished in P. Battistuzzi (Ed.), *Benedetto*

generation, “*naturaliter* Crociana”, which, above all, recognized Croce as “the Master of freedom in the years of dictatorship”.<sup>7</sup> Between the end of the 1920s and the 1930s – which coincided with the consolidation of the fascist regime in Italy – Bobbio was formed in Turin within what has been called “left-wing Crocianism”, which obviously owes much to Croce, but also to Piero Gobetti, from whom Bobbio learnt the critical attitude towards Italian socialism and the sensitivity towards the demands of the workers' movement. Bobbio therefore underwent the fascination of the myth of Croce just like most of the young Italian scholars and in particular those of Turin, because Turin was at that time the most “Crocian” of the Italian cities, after Naples of course<sup>8</sup>.

Bobbio himself recounted his first approaches to Croce's discussion. In 1927, during the last year of high school, his friend Leone Ginzburg gave him the *Nuovi saggi di estetica* (*New Essays on Aesthetics*)<sup>9</sup>. The following year Bobbio bought the *Storia d'Italia* (*History of Italy*), which had just been published. In December 1928, in the first year of university, he read the *Elementi di politica* (*Elements of politics*) for the first time<sup>10</sup>. A work, the latter, to which he returned several times in the course of his life, since in it he recognized an evident and irrefutable proof of how much the political culture of Croce was much richer than that of the other exponent of the Italian neo-idealism, Giovanni Gentile. Already from these early readings, in any case, it can be understood how Bobbio is only partially interested in Croce as a philosopher, who had brought philosophy back to the center of the activities of knowledge by defining it as a Philosophy of the Spirit. The side of Croce's thought that interested him most was the political one, it was his liberalism, theorized between 1928 and 1938 in his “great trilogy of freedom”<sup>11</sup>: *History of Italy*, *Storia d'Europa* (*History of Europe*) and *Storia come pensiero e come azione* (*History as thought and as action*). As it is well known, in these works Croce theorized a metapolitical version of liberalism, conceiving freedom on the one hand as an explanatory principle of the historical course, and on the other as a moral ideal of humanity. History, as a product of the Spirit, was intended as a continuous development, a continuous renewal by the free creativity of man. Deeply convinced of the impossibility of freedom disappearing from the world, since this would amount to the extinction of history itself, Croce, in the years of Fascism, argued that no matter how obscure the present appeared, freedom was always destined to triumph. In this sense, freedom was, for him, not only the criterion for understanding history, but also the moral principle that should have guided human action: acting morally meant fighting for freedom to triumph in all fields<sup>12</sup>.

Until the end of his intellectual itinerary, Bobbio would never cease to underline the

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*Croce: una verifica* (Roma: L'Opinione, 1978), pp. 31-32.

<sup>7</sup> Bobbio, ‘Il nostro Croce’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 5, p. 790.

<sup>8</sup> N. Bobbio, *Trent'anni di storia della cultura a Torino (1920-1950)* (Torino: CRT, 1977), p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> See N. Bobbio, ‘Ritratto di Leone Ginzburg’, in N. Bobbio, *Maestri e compagni* (Firenze: Passigli Editori, 1984), p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> See N. Bobbio, *Autobiografia*, ed. by A. Papuzzi (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1997), pp. 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> Bobbio, *Trent'anni di storia della cultura a Torino*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 8, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> For a summary in English on Croce's liberalism see R. Bellamy, *Modern Italian Social Theory. Ideology and Politics from Pareto to the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 91-98. For the idealistic and Hegelian foundations of Croce's liberalism see R. Bellamy, *Croce, Gramsci, Bobbio and the Italian Political Tradition* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2014), pp. 65-131.

historical and civil importance of Croce's liberalism. Nonetheless, while never doubting the role of beacon of freedom played by the philosopher during the years of the fascist regime, on a theoretical level he would soon come to detach himself from his conception of freedom. This happened gradually, in the period from the years of the Resistance to 1955, the publication year of one of Bobbio's *Politics and culture*, with the main ideas of the two major essays dedicated to Croce, a fundamental point of reference for anyone who still wants to deal with the thought of this author today<sup>13</sup>.

Considerably influenced by the Neo-Hegelian idealism, it was the first theoretical attempt, made by Bobbio between the end of the Thirties and the first half of the Forties, to harmonize the principles of freedom and equality through "personalism", a philosophical synthesis that sought to "realize the unity of autonomy, responsibility and solidarity starting from the individual"<sup>14</sup>. In an attempt to find an alternative path both to liberal individualism and to totalitarian statolatry and collectivism, in some articles from the late Thirties and in the university lectures on philosophy of law held in Padua in the early Forties, Bobbio developed the concept of "person", understood as an end in itself and as an "individual in a relationship of reciprocity with other individuals". It was a concept with which he tried to overcome the problem of the tension between the individual and society, between individualism and universalism and thus to save individuality without falling into individualism. In search of a "third way" capable of overcoming this aporia, in this first phase of his political reflection Bobbio underlined the importance of the "relationship existing between the individual and the community", of the "person as a meeting place between individual and society"<sup>15</sup>. Taking up the concept of "community" from German sociology, Bobbio meant it not as an original and natural entity, but as an option of reason, as the result of the ability of individual men to establish relationships with others without falling into a mere intersection of interests. Moreover, in this perspective, he made the category of community coincide with the concept developed by Bergson of "open society", understood as that society in which "mechanical and mechanized individuals no longer act, but people as autonomous centers and aware of social facts"<sup>16</sup>. In this way, Bobbio created a close correlation between the concept of person and democracy conceived as the ideal political model of a society made up of people. Democracy, in that particular context, was therefore for him the true and only antithesis to the totalitarian state.

Precisely by virtue of this attempt at hybridization between freedom and equality instances, as well as for the friendship that bound him to some of its members, Bobbio, in the years of the Resistance, recognized himself in the program of the Italian Action

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<sup>13</sup> N. Bobbio, 'Croce e la politica della cultura', *Rivista di filosofia*, 44 (1953), pp. 247-265, then in Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 100-120; N. Bobbio, 'Benedetto Croce e il liberalismo', *Rivista di filosofia*, 46 (1955), pp. 261-286, then in Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 238-268.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. P.P. Portinaro, *Introduzione a Bobbio* (Laterza: Roma, 2008), p. 41. On Bobbio's personalism, theorized taking inspiration from Max Scheler, Edith Stein and Gerda Walther's phenomenological philosophy, see T. Greco, *Norberto Bobbio. Un itinerario intellettuale tra filosofia e politica* (Milano: Donzelli, 2000), pp. 11-19 and 29-42. On personalism in general see also D. Zolo, 'Personalismo', in N. Bobbio, N. Matteucci, G. Pasquino (Eds), *Dizionario di politica* (Milano: Tea, 1990), pp. 787-788.

<sup>15</sup> Greco, *Norberto Bobbio*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> N. Bobbio, 'La persona e la società', *Annali della facoltà giuridica dell'Università di Camerino*, 12, n. 2 (1938), pp. 4-5.

Party, of which he founded the Padua office in 1943<sup>17</sup>. The Action Party was a heterogeneous political galaxy that gathered very different personalities: in it we found intellectuals who drew on the project of the “liberal revolution” of Piero Gobetti and the liberal socialism of Carlo Rosselli, but also personalities who had been active in the “Justice and Freedom” movement such as Franco Venturi or who had embraced the program of the Italian liberal socialism developed by Aldo Capitini and Guido Calogero. What united the exponents of the Action Party, however, was the need to reflect on the concepts of freedom and equality, liberalism and democracy, in order to reshape their theoretical foundations. Obviously, this need had to deal with Croce's political and philosophical thought. Since 1942, Croce collaborated in an anti-fascist perspective with the Action Party, in which some of his most important disciples had converged like Guido De Ruggiero and Adolfo Omodeo. After the publication of the Action Party program in January 1943, however, he began to criticize its work precisely because of the will of its exponents to combine the demands of liberalism with those of socialism<sup>18</sup>. Although for many members of the party, as well as for Croce, freedom was a “supreme, irreplaceable value to be restored”, they nevertheless considered it complementary to the ideals of equality and social justice, in stark contrast to Croce to whom freedom belonged “to the moral moment, to be kept distinct from the economic one (to which social justice was relegated)”<sup>19</sup>. From a theoretical point of view, Bobbio felt personally involved in this debate between Croce and the Action Party, since he himself, in a similar way, but not identical to the Liberals Socialists, was trying to combine, as mentioned, the demands of liberalism and instances of socialism through personalism<sup>20</sup>.

Beyond his militancy in the Action Party, Bobbio's detachment from both personalism and Croce's conception of liberalism took place thanks to some important intellectual “meetings”. I am not referring to the encounter with the works of Carlo Cattaneo of which Bobbio edited the anthological collection *Stati Uniti d'Italia (United States of Italy)* accompanied by a substantial introduction and whose “positive” philosophy led him towards the Neo-Enlightenment, nor to that with Gaetano Salvemini, from whom Bobbio took up the idea of democracy as a method and as a set of procedural rules. I am rather referring to the encounter with the natural law tradition, with Thomas Hobbes in particular. It is no coincidence that, in 1946, Bobbio dedicated his university lectures to natural law in the 17th century. In these lessons, however, it is possible to notice the striking absence of Locke. But there is no doubt that, thanks to natural law, the methodological individualism broke into Bobbio's intellectual path; from that moment on, he was continually led to critically question himself on the concept of State and on the relationship of the latter with the individual conceived as the bearer of natural rights.

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<sup>17</sup> Later on, Bobbio would have been very critical towards the Action Party. See P. Bonetti, ‘Norberto Bobbio tra realismo politico e utopia’, in P. Bonetti, *Breve storia del liberalismo di sinistra. Da Gobetti a Bobbio* (Macerata: Liberilibri, 2014), pp. 157-174.

<sup>18</sup> On the contrast between Croce and the Action Party see S. Setta, *Croce, il liberalismo e l'Italia postfascista* (Roma: Bonacci, 1979), pp. 53-65.

<sup>19</sup> Setta, *ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> On the relationship with liberal-socialists and on this first period of Bobbio's thought on freedom and equality see F. Sbarberi, ‘Liberté et égalité. La formation de la théorie démocratique chez Bobbio’, *Archives de Philosophie*, 57 (1994), pp. 3-31. For an analysis of Bobbio's liberal socialism see also in this same issue the essay by David Ragazzoni.

## 2. The distancing from historicism and personalism: Karl Popper's "import" into Italy

In addition to natural law, another decisive aspect must not be overlooked in order to understand the change in Bobbio's way of conceiving liberalism<sup>21</sup>. In the same months following the Liberation, after a trip to England in the autumn of 1945, Bobbio was the first to "import" into Italy a work that would become a classic of liberal literature: *The Open Society and its Enemies* by Karl Popper<sup>22</sup>. The book, translated into Italian only in 1973, was reviewed by him in 1946 in "Rivista di filosofia", a journal of philosophy<sup>23</sup>. Bobbio presented Popper as "a researcher of the methodological problem in the field of physics and mathematics", identifying essentially two macro themes in his work. First of all the negation of the closed society, "whose conservation is entrusted to a religious or mythical authority, to a blind obedience which denies any personality" and the contemporary defense of the open society "where each individual counts as a person and counts for the degree of responsibility with which he faces the tasks of social life". Secondly, the struggle against historicism, within which Popper included "all the currents of thought which, claiming to draw universal laws from the course of history in order to predict the future, confuse prophecy with history"<sup>24</sup>. After all, Popper's entire analysis was conducted through a close criticism of those he considered the two greatest exponents of historicism, Plato and Marx. Bobbio then underlined how Popper admired Marx's "realistic vigor", but in the end, he saw in him, a "false prophet" precisely for the tendency, which derived from Hegel's heavy influence, "to determine the universal laws of history"<sup>25</sup>. In these words, in the appreciation of Popper's anti-historicist and anti-Hegelian dispute, one cannot fail to find a first questioning by Bobbio of Croce's own historicism and of his conception of history as the history of freedom.

Beyond this, it is above all on a methodological level that Popper's work appeared to Bobbio as a real shot in the arm after decades of obscurantism and irrationalism. Popper's "Enlightenment humanism"<sup>26</sup> was based on rationalism conceived as "a way of solving problems by appealing to clear thought and experience rather than to emotions and passions". A rationalism which, however, as Bobbio wrote, should have been "critical", recognize its limits and leave the preliminary choice between rationalism and irrationalism to morality. Moreover, the latter was indicated as the great enemy to fight, being "the most dangerous ally of totalitarianism in the form of a call to the lost unity of the tribe"<sup>27</sup>.

Confirming the importance of reading Popper's book and the lesson that Bobbio drew

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<sup>21</sup> See Greco, *Norberto Bobbio, op. cit.*, pp. 82-86.

<sup>22</sup> On reception of Popper's works in Italy see B. Lai, *Popper in Italia: le disavventure di una filosofia politica* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> N. Bobbio, Review on Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies. I. The Age of Plato; II. The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel and Marx*, London: Routledge, 1945, *Rivista di filosofia*, 37, n. 1-2 (1946), pp. 204-206.

<sup>24</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>25</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>26</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>27</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 205.



from it, in the article *Società chiusa e società aperta* (*Closed society and open society*) published in the journal “Il Ponte” a few months later, he resumed and deepened the idea according to which the “return to tribalism” was to be considered as “the most incisive and least abstract criterion for explaining the phenomenon of the totalitarian State”. After all, the tribe is that particular type of community in which individuals, bound by a religion made up of magical symbols and practices, are transformed into automatons “by virtue of mechanical obedience to social mores and inexorable fidelity to the leader”<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, at the origin of the distinction between closed society and open society, Bobbio recognized that proper distinction made by German sociologists at the end of the 19th century – by Tönnies in particular – between community and society, which he himself had used in his process of theorizing of personalism. According to Bobbio, this distinction had been useful for classification purposes in sociology, but became adverse when the State science took hold of it with “its poison, transforming a distinction of concepts into an opposition of values”<sup>29</sup>. As an expression of the contrast between universalism and individualism, the distinction between community and society obviously raised the problem of the role of the single individual who, in the community, is linked to his fellow men by bonds that are neither occasional nor conventional, but natural and lasting. If in the name of the community, conceived as the “participation of the individual in the whole”, “the sacrifice of the individual, his dedication, his faith, his annihilation” is required, then the community coincided with the concept theorized by Bergson, later taken up by Popper himself, of the closed society.

As it can be seen, through the identification of the community with the closed society, a tipping occurred in the perspective of Bobbio, who in practice distanced himself from his own personalism. If in the previous observation, in fact, the community coincided with the Bergsonian open society and precisely within the community the single individuals should have recognized themselves as persons, from that moment the community was considered exclusively by him as the place of tribalism, fanaticism, of the obscurantism and mortification of the individual. After all, in face of the rubble left by totalitarianism, Bobbio realized the impossibility of establishing a connection between the democratic coexistence of individuals conceived as persons and the concept of community; from that moment on, therefore, this category disappeared from his thought, as did any yielding to organicistic demands.

On the contrary, in opposition to tribal society, Bobbio exalted the open society which, based on a morality based on individual responsibility and characterized by universal suffrage, guarantee of the individual rights, control of public powers and autonomy of local authorities, ended up coinciding in everything and for all with liberal democracy. Anticipating the criticism he would have addressed in a few years to socialist democracies, Bobbio already in 1946 clarified that a democracy “which is not the formal covering of an open society, it is a form without content, it is a false

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<sup>28</sup> N. Bobbio, ‘Società chiusa e società aperta’, in N. Bobbio, *Tra due Repubbliche: alle origini della democrazia italiana*, with an historical note from T. Greco (Roma: Donzelli, 1996), p. 90.

<sup>29</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 88.

democracy, a deceptive and insincere democracy”<sup>30</sup>. One cannot speak of “democracy as a political and social juridical order” without conceiving it at the same time as that political regime capable of bringing out “the man, the individual, the person in his dignity and in his inviolability”<sup>31</sup>.

Popper's closed society/open society scheme therefore appeared ideal to Bobbio to highlight the profound differences between the totalitarian State and the democratic-liberal State and also worked well to denounce the danger of the new world that was being structured in those months. Bobbio warned: “the closed society is not dead, only because three or four totalitarian states have fallen down”. The closed society is, in fact, an inherent risk in man not yet civilized, still stuck in barbarism, the “perennial temptation of that primitive man who slumbers in each of us and wakes up and breaks loose in moments of social upheaval”<sup>32</sup>. In this way, Bobbio already foreshadowed the great tragedy of the Cold War, the politics of the areas of influence, a clear expression of the spirit of the closed society, because “it doesn't matter that the boundaries of the tribe widen to encompass almost half the world: the tribal spirit remains”<sup>33</sup>.

Researchers have perhaps not stressed enough the influence that Popper's work had in Bobbio's development of the critique of the totalitarian State in the aftermath of the end of the war; a criticism that, from that moment, was fully carried out in the wake of liberalism and a reasoning that placed the individual at the center. Bobbio's approach to methodological individualism certainly occurred, first of all, thanks to natural law tradition, but also thanks to the reading of *The Open Society and its Enemies*. After all, also in another important contemporary contribution, as the inauguration of the academic year of the University of Padua held on 6 November 1946 and entitled *La persona e lo Stato* (*The Person and the State*), the theme of the totalitarian state returned, intended as the “revival of the Tribal State”, in which man is totally absorbed in the group. But unlike the contributions of a few years earlier, Bobbio opposed this type of regime more with the liberal State than with democracy. Indeed, precisely in the latter, he identified the possible totalitarian degeneration. Through a brief but effective critique of Rousseau and his desire to introduce “by force the State into the personal sphere”, Bobbio defined totalitarianism as a “phenomenon of total politicization of man's life, of reduction to politics, that is, to tool of the State, of culture and art, of philosophy and religion, as well as possessions and attachments”<sup>34</sup>.

In truth, the whole reasoning concerning the relationship between State and individual started from the contrast between two abstractions and entifications of the State, the “State-divinity” and the “State-machine”, which, according to Bobbio, were formulated together in the doctrine of Thomas Hobbes, the “most courageous and coherent doctrine of the modern State at the beginning of its formation”<sup>35</sup>. These two metaphorical

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<sup>30</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>31</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>32</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>33</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>34</sup> N. Bobbio, ‘La persona e lo Stato’, in Bobbio, *Tra due Repubbliche*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 28, p. 84.

<sup>35</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 73.

representations of the State split into two distinct conceptions: that of the State “with its own morality, different from and superior to that of individuals”, which implements ideal values, that is, the ethical State, and that of the technical State, which it has no ends in itself, but is “an instrument for the realization of ends that are foreign to it”<sup>36</sup>. Bobbio recognized in both concepts, the first one theorized in an exemplary way by Hegel, the second by Marx, a serious consequence: “the detachment of the State from man”. It is no coincidence that the doctrines aimed at justifying the totalitarian State had appealed to both concepts: ethics to “argue that everything had to be inside the State and nothing could be outside the State”, technicality to define the state as “apparatus of forces in the hands of a leader and at the service of a nation”, a State downgraded therefore to instrumental value<sup>37</sup>.

In the aftermath of the end of the war, it was therefore of primary importance in Bobbio to think about the role of the individual within the State; but it seems to him equally important to highlight the risks deriving from considering exclusively the two corrective measures to this entification of the State, the two currents that historically attempted the process of “humanization” of the State: liberalism and democracy. The first, starting from a premise deriving from natural law philosophy, that is, understanding man as the bearer of individual rights prior to the State, considers the latter “as a machine to be rendered harmless by limiting its functions”. Democracy, starting from the idea of the natural equality of all men which implies the active participation of all in the State government, identifies in it “a dominant will to be made less oppressive”<sup>38</sup>. But both of these doctrinal currents, according to Bobbio, contain the germ of degeneration and therefore a possible danger for the individual. In liberalism and in the claim to limit the State intervention not only within the private and conscience domain, but also in that of the human external action, that is, of economic interests and material well-being, the risk of anarchy nests. On the other hand, in democracy, there is always the danger of “absolutizing the political dimension” of the man, of extending the participation to the spiritual and religious sphere, of politicizing the interior life. In short, the danger of totalitarianism lurks in democracy.

As can be seen, already in this paper the contrast between two different and opposing concepts begins to emerge, that of the “limit of the State in front of the man-person” and that of “participation of men in the State within the limit set”<sup>39</sup>. Two principles that in Bobbio's thought, since this moment, complement each other to give life to the regime that more than any other is able to guarantee respect for the individual as a bearer of natural rights: liberal democracy.

As for the concept of freedom, from this moment on it begins to be defined no longer in a personalistic key, but as an “attribute of the subject and, at the same time, as a system of values that can be pursued autonomously by individuals and legally protected

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<sup>36</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 75-76.

<sup>37</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>38</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>39</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 85.

by the state”<sup>40</sup>. Understood in this way, that is, conceived on the institutional level, freedom could coexist with equality, while if conceived only on the philosophical level it would have been an opposite and irreconcilable value. In this definition, it is clear the separation from the Crocian conception of a freedom that belongs to the moral sphere.

### **3. The philosophical foundations of liberalism: the showdown with Croce in Politics and culture**

As mentioned, already in the writings and interventions of the two-year period 1945-1946 a new idea of freedom had emerged in Bobbio, but only starting from the early 1950s, in a series of essays that would later be collected in *Politics and culture*, he clarified better his own conception of liberalism.

There were various reasons, above all political, but also more strictly cultural, which in his eyes made unavoidable the theoretical problem of freedom. The first is that relating to the contrast between two worlds and two systems of values, an expression of the politics of the areas of influence and of the Cold War, which posed the problem of the attitude to be assumed towards communism. This seemed particularly relevant in a country like Italy, where, in conjunction with the electoral round of 1948, the ideological clash between pro-Western Catholic culture and Communist culture had worsened in a worrying way<sup>41</sup>. Secondly, also in response to the importance that Marxism was acquiring in the field of philosophical-political reflection, it seemed increasingly necessary to defend the foundations and classics of the liberal-democratic culture. In light of this, Bobbio's response was not to embrace anti-communism, as many liberal intellectuals did in that particular historical turning point<sup>42</sup>. One of his political-practical aims in the first half of the 1950s was instead to establish a dialogue between opposing sides, between liberals and communists<sup>43</sup>. Thus, in *Invito al colloquio (Invitation to dialogue)*, published in 1951 in the magazine “Comprendre” and then included programmatically as an introductory essay to *Politics and Culture*, he exhorted liberals to consider “to what extent and within what limits the new communist society” was heir to the “conception of the liberal world and history” and invited communists to consider

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<sup>40</sup> F. Sbarberi, ‘Quale liberalsocialismo? Il confronto teorico tra Calogero e Bobbio’, in P. Pezzino and G. Ranzato (Eds), *Laboratorio di Storia. Studi in onore di Claudio Pavone* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1994), p. 259.

<sup>41</sup> For an overview on Post-war Italian ideologies see J.-W. Mueller, ‘The Paradoxes of Post-War Italian Political Thought’, *History of European Ideas*, 39 (2013), pp. 79-102.

<sup>42</sup> Think, in this regard, the example of Raymond Aron and see in this same issue the essay by Aurelian Craiutu and Maurizio Griffo that deals with the comparison between Bobbio's and Aron's attitudes during the Cold War.

<sup>43</sup> On Bobbio's politics of dialogue see A. Craiutu, *Faces of Moderation. The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, pp. 112-146. As far as the discussion between Bobbio and the communists is concerned, see Bellamy, *Modern Italian Social Theory*, op. cit., Ref. 12, pp. 141-153; F. H. Adler, ‘Norberto Bobbio on Liberalism, Socialism and Democracy’, *The Polish Sociological Bulletin*, 101 (1993), pp. 21-40; N. Urbinati, ‘Liberalism in the Cold War: Norberto Bobbio and the dialogue with the PCI’, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 8 (2003), pp. 578-603; A. Camparini, ‘Quale socialismo? Un 'liberalsocialista' a confronto con i comunisti: Norberto Bobbio’, in A. Camparini and W. Crivellini (Eds), *Liberalismo e democrazia nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2015), pp. 127-175; M. Albeltaro, ‘Un dialogo lungo una vita. Bobbio e i comunisti’, in P. Polito (Ed.), *L'intellettuale ieri e oggi. Generazioni in dialogo con Norberto Bobbio* (Torino: Ananke Lab, 2017), pp. 33-44.

“to what extent and within what limits” it was necessary “to accept the values posed by liberal civilization in order to claim to constitute a new civilization”<sup>44</sup>. But Bobbio's intent was not simply to favor a mediation on the practical level between two opposing camps, but also to demonstrate on the theoretical level a conciliation between freedom and equality, on which, as previously mentioned, he had begun to think since the 1940s. Thus, one of the themes that ran through all those essays of *Politics and culture* in which he confronted and argued with the communist intellectuals Galvano Della Volpe, Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli and with the PCI Secretary Palmiro Togliatti, the main theme, in addition to that relating to the role of the intellectual in relation to power, was that of the relationship between liberalism and marxism that Bobbio did not consider irreconcilable at all.

Beyond the confrontation with the communists, another event profoundly marked the Italian political-philosophical culture of the early 1950s, contributing to Bobbio's definition of the philosophical foundations of his own liberalism: the death of Benedetto Croce, which took place on November 20, 1952. As it is well known, Bobbio was throughout his career a great writer of intellectual commemoration profiles and so the confrontation with Croce was also stimulated by the invitations he received to give public speeches and to write intellectual portraits for various journals. These commemorative contributions, in which he emphasized above all the civil function of Croce's liberalism, were part of a heated debate on Croce's legacy. The peculiarity of Bobbio's position lay in the search for a sort of third way between the hard and pure “Crocians”, who continued to exalt Croce as the only noteworthy exponent of Italian philosophy and liberalism without questioning his ideas, and the “anti-Crocians”, who questioned the political value of Croce's conception of freedom and who doubted his role in the years of the Fascist regime or even accused him of having been a precursor of Fascism<sup>45</sup>.

Beyond this clash, which cannot be explored here, Bobbio between 1953 and 1955 devoted extensive research to Croce's political thought which, in the initial intentions, could have led to the publication of a real monograph<sup>46</sup>. Having soon abandoned this wide-ranging project, Bobbio limited himself to addressing only two aspects of Croce's thought: that relating to the role of the intellectual with respect to power<sup>47</sup> and that of his liberalism. Therefore, with the essay *Benedetto Croce e il liberalismo* (*Benedetto Croce and liberalism*), he decided to concentrate on the aspect of Croce's political philosophy

<sup>44</sup> N. Bobbio, ‘Invito al colloquio’, *Comprendre*, 3 (1951), pp. 102-13, then republished in Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p. 24.

<sup>45</sup> On the inheritance of Croce in Italy see F. Tessitore (Ed.), *L'eredità di Croce* (Napoli: Guida, 1986); R. Franchini, G. Lunati and F. Tessitore (Eds), *Il ritorno di Croce nella cultura italiana. Atti del Convegno rotariano di Pescasseroli, 22 ottobre 1989*, con un aggiornamento bibliografico dal 1953 al 1988 (Milano: Rusconi, 1990).

<sup>46</sup> Among the papers of Bobbio's archive there is a real index of a hypothetical monograph on Croce's politics, divided in three parts and seven chapters, see N. Bobbio, *Archivio Norberto Bobbio*, SR, faldone 133, fasc. 658 “Raccolta di lavori e documentazione su Benedetto Croce, 1952-1969 – ‘Croce’”. On Bobbio's archive see P. Polito, ‘L'archivio-labirinto di Norberto Bobbio. All'ingresso del labirinto’, on the website of Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, <http://www.centrogobetti.it/images/stories/Intro-Labirinto.pdf> (visited on August 26th, 2021); M. Brondino, E. Caruso, ‘Introduzione archivistica’, *ibid.*, <http://www.centrogobetti.it/images/stories/Intro-archivistica.pdf> (visited on August 26th, 2021).

<sup>47</sup> See Bobbio, ‘Croce e la politica della cultura’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 13.

which he considered most interesting from a theoretical point of view, but which he also found more useful for the practical purposes that he proposed to pursue with the collection *Politics and culture*. By concentrating on the Croce's liberalism, in fact, Bobbio was able to fight on two fronts: in the confrontation with the communists he was able to claim the importance of liberalism and to urge the Marxists to recognize the importance of civil liberties; in comparison with the liberals he was able to demonstrate that it was not necessary to be Croce supporters to conceive a liberalism that was not at all economicistic. In short, by criticizing Croce's liberalism, Bobbio had the opportunity to outline his own conception of freedom, philosophically distant from that of Croce, but in some respects close to it.

The essay *Benedetto Croce and liberalism* can ideally be divided into two broad parts. In the first, corresponding to paragraphs from 1 to 14, Bobbio reconstructed Croce's progressive approach to liberalism, starting with the first "annotations" published in the journal "La Critica" in the early 1920s, passing through major political and historiographical works of the 1920s and 1930s, up to the contributions of the early 1940s in which Croce had argued with the liberal-socialists. The second part of the essay, from paragraphs 15 to 22, was instead a strong criticism of Croce's conception of liberalism: here Bobbio wanted to refute the belief, deeply rooted in Italy, that Croce had been "the best, if not the only one, interpreter, authorized by historical providence, to formulate a theory of liberalism". In the particular context of the early 1950s, after half a century of domination of idealistic culture, this idea was shared both by "Crocians", who considered Croce "the thinker who first" had developed "a complete philosophy of liberalism", and the "anti-Crocians", especially Marxists, who got rid of liberalism in general by labeling Croce philosophy "as conservative, reactionary, if not downright pro-fascist". In short, Bobbio's aim was to refute the identification of Croce's liberalism with liberalism *tout court*, and to highlight its intrinsic anomaly.

The preparatory notes for the essay that I found in Bobbio's archive clearly clarify the basic thesis of this second part – the most significant for understanding the idea that Bobbio himself had of liberalism – which can be condensed in this statement: "Croce was culturally and spiritually in the worst condition for becoming liberal". He had certainly been a liberal "by temperament and sentiment", as he himself liked to repeat; but it was wrong to consider him a "liberal by doctrine" and even less the leading theorizer of liberalism, since the philosophical concepts on which he had based his theory of freedom were "the perfect definition of anti-liberal." These concepts were summarized as follows by Bobbio in his handwritten notes:

- 1) mockery of natural law (difficulty in which a historicist philosophy finds itself as liberal);
- 2) anti-individualism (the individual is realized in ...); 3) anti-Enlightenment attitude; 4) admiration for romanticism (in which typically anti-liberal, reactionary and Hegelian philosophies had emerged); 5) admirat[ion] for Germany and contempt for nat[ions] with liberal tradition<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> N. Bobbio, *Appunti manoscritti di Bobbio*. "Per uno studio sulla filosofia politica di Benedetto Croce" post 1953, in *Archivio Norberto Bobbio*, SR, faldone 133, fasc. 658, *op. cit.*, Ref. 46.

In Bobbio's opinion, among these five points the devaluation of natural law and the controversy against the Enlightenment, which had almost always gone hand in hand, influenced negatively Croce's political thought. He had condemned the Enlightenment "as an expression of the eighteenth-century mentality as opposed to the more mature nineteenth-century historical mentality, as abstract rationalism as opposed to concrete rationalism"<sup>49</sup>. As for natural law, Croce had always defined it as pure abstraction and as an anti-historical current of thought. From the theoretical point of view, in his opinion, natural law had "offered the philosophical foundation to the egalitarian idea according to which all men, being equal by nature, must be equal by right", with the consequent devaluation of the historical course which is instead the result of variety and the diversity of men. In other words, the aversion to natural law and the Enlightenment ended up merging in Croce with the aversion to democratism. But precisely here, according to Bobbio, one of the limits of Croce's conception lies: he did not see that "natural law had laid the foundations not only of the democratic conception of the state, but also of the liberal one"<sup>50</sup>. The devaluation of natural law had prevented Croce from grasping what for Bobbio was the very essence of liberalism, the "theory that still today differentiates a liberal doctrine from another that is not liberal": the theory "of the juridical limits of the State power"<sup>51</sup>.

Parallel to the devaluation of natural law, Croce had instead exalted romanticism, identifying in it the theoretical premises of liberalism. However, Bobbio pointed out, on the one hand the age of romanticism coincided with the strengthening of nationalism and socialism – two currents mostly antithetical to liberalism – on the other hand the two main exponents of philosophical romanticism, Hegel and Comte, had generated political theories that had nothing to do with the tradition of liberal thought. From the first, in particular, Croce had taken up the idea (later further spread by Cousin, Michelet and Quinet) of "history as the history of freedom". Bobbio then underlined the profound difference between the meaning of freedom underlying this expression and the meaning attributed to it by the classical liberal doctrine. The idealistic and "Crocian" concept of freedom, to be understood as the "creative force, or creativity, of the Spirit", had a "theological" character, of "freedom as a divine attribute"<sup>52</sup>. On the other hand, classical liberalism by freedom means the absence of constraints and impediments. Where the classical doctrine needs to be defined with respect to what impediment this freedom exists, in the Croce's conception any determination of freedom obscures the concept. In short, the theological idea of freedom of the Spirit was according to Bobbio completely "extraneous to the theory of liberalism"<sup>53</sup> since he did not intend freedom "as something that characterizes a certain way of conceiving social relations in the state" and that "has its own institutions validated by historical experience"<sup>54</sup>. In fact, if history is the history of freedom, then history is also implemented through the work of despots, dictatorships

<sup>49</sup> Bobbio, 'Benedetto Croce e il liberalismo', *op. cit.*, Ref. 13, p. 244.

<sup>50</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>51</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>52</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>53</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>54</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 260.

and illiberal regimes.

In addition to the idea of history as the history of freedom, Croce had also drawn from romantic philosophy the concept of “freedom as a moral ideal”, of morality understood as the elevation of life coinciding with the “unfolding of freedom”. This idea in Croce foresaw a clear separation between the “ideal of freedom” and the “technique of its political implementation”<sup>55</sup>, a “detachment of the moral ideal from its historical achievements”<sup>56</sup>, from the institutions in which it was incarnated. Precisely in this was the greatest limitation of Croce’s liberalism. The identification of freedom with the moral ideal did not serve the two purposes for which liberalism had historically established itself: on the one hand that of distinguishing a liberal state from an authoritarian state, on the other that of proposing the liberal state as a model of action. In short, for Bobbio it was not possible to define liberalism without considering the institutions that implement it and in which it takes place. The history of liberalism was for him the history of those institutions which aim to stem “the invasion of public authorities in individual activity”, “by distinguishing what in man can participate in the state from what cannot be participated, in short, safeguarding the individual from the total reduction to a member of the community”<sup>57</sup>. Ultimately, he reproached Croce for having lost himself in theorizing, for having lost in the political sphere the same lesson of method that he himself had provided in other spheres, that of starting from concrete problems; he had detached “liberalism as an absolute value from empirical institutions” and had “emphasized the end and not the means”<sup>58</sup>.

In confirmation of all this, Bobbio stressed the fact that Croce had mostly ignored the English-speaking political writers, in whom he had searched for “not the institutions of the liberal state” on which they had made very important contributions, but the “philosophical concept of freedom”. Not surprisingly, he had exalted the German political thought and its alleged liberal side. Moreover, this admiration was a constant, in general, in Italian culture, which in the first half of the twentieth century had been strongly marked and dominated by neo-idealism. Suffice it to say that in the famous *Storia del liberalismo europeo (History of European Liberalism)*, a book that was also very important for Bobbio's generation<sup>59</sup>, Guido De Ruggiero had assigned a central place to Hegel, considered the one who had had the merit “of having drawn from Kantian identification of freedom with the spirit the idea of an organic development of freedom”. Certainly, contrary to De Ruggiero, Croce did not go so far as to make Hegel “the philosopher of liberalism par excellence”<sup>60</sup>, on the contrary he had criticized his ethical conception of the state, but on his philosophy, above all, the prejudice weighed, typically Hegelian, towards the English liberalism, which in fact he considered irremediably compromised by its utilitarian inspiration. In short, in Croce's political philosophy (and in all those whom he had influenced) a true paradox had emerged:

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<sup>55</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>56</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>57</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, pp. 262-263.

<sup>58</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>59</sup> See Bobbio, *Autobiografia, op. cit.*, Ref. 10, p. 91.

<sup>60</sup> Bobbio, ‘Benedetto Croce e il liberalismo’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 13, p. 254.



precisely because of that irreducible tendency to separate theory and practice, he was convinced that he had found the essence of freedom not among the peoples who had realized it on a practical level, the English and the French, but among those who, according to him, had theorized its philosophical foundations through idealism, the Germans.

#### **4. Benjamin Constant's thought interpretation and the two concepts of freedom (before Berlin)**

Croce's admiration for the German political thought had gone hand in hand with the devaluation of the English tradition which instead Bobbio, as mentioned, began to deepen and appreciate right after the end of the Second World War. From this point of view, Croce's and Bobbio's two conceptions of liberalism could not appear further away: Bobbio, as mentioned, placed the philosophical premises of freedom in natural law, rejecting its alleged romantic roots. Furthermore, he exalted the English way to liberalism not so much for having found in utilitarianism an alternative foundation to that of natural law, but for the importance that this tradition had had in the development of the institutions of the liberal state. If therefore Bobbio's judgment on the English and German liberal traditions was clear, his evaluation of French liberalism was more ambiguous.

The interpretation and use that Bobbio made of the political thought of Benjamin Constant, an author constantly present in the essays collected in *Politics and Culture*, was emblematic in this sense. In Croce's essay on liberalism, Bobbio defined the discourse *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes* "one of the clearest formulations, which also remained exemplary afterwards, of the doctrine of classical liberalism understood as the doctrine of the State power limits, as an affirmation of 'freedom from the State', as opposed to the ancient theory (or what Constant considers as such) of 'freedom in the State'"<sup>61</sup>. Bobbio therefore underlined the contrasting character between freedom-independence and freedom-participation and used Constant's discourse to criticize Croce's liberal conception. The latter, in the essay *Constant e Jellinek: intorno alla differenza tra libertà degli antichi e quella dei moderni (Constant and Jellinek: on the difference between the freedom of the ancients and that of the moderns)*<sup>62</sup>, had focused on "a secondary aspect, consisting in having Constant understood modern freedom not as hedonistic but as ethical, having understood it as he, Croce, would have understood it"<sup>63</sup>. In short, Constant's *Discours* served Bobbio to theoretically criticize the conception of freedom as a moral ideal and to emphasize

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<sup>61</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>62</sup> B. Croce, 'Constant e Jellinek: intorno alla differenza tra libertà degli antichi e quella dei moderni', nota letta all'Accademia di scienze morali e politiche della Società Reale di Napoli dal socio Benedetto Croce (Napoli: Tipografia Sangiovanni, 1930), then republished in B. Croce, *Etica e politica* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1931), pp. 294-301.

<sup>63</sup> Bobbio, 'Benedetto Croce e il liberalismo', *op. cit.*, Ref. 13, p. 248.

freedom as a theory of the limits of the State power. And, in fact, he stressed that this second “way of seeing the freedom of moderns was the product of the natural law doctrine of Calvinistic origin”, thus establishing once again a relationship of continuity between the modern doctrine of natural law and liberalism.

However, in stating that Constant “did or did not immediately appeal to the natural law philosophers and the Calvinistic tradition, he presented himself as the heir and continuer of that tradition”, Bobbio, in my opinion, somehow ended up reducing the importance of post-revolutionary French liberalism, in particular of all those thinkers, including Constant, who had gone beyond the natural law scheme, arriving at reasoning through history. For example, in reproaching Croce for referring to the liberal authors of the French Restoration such as Constant, Royer-Collard and Tocqueville<sup>64</sup>, Bobbio rhetorically asked “what is in Constant and Tocqueville, to remember the major ones, that was not already in Locke's constitutionalism, Montesquieu's guarantism, Kant's juridical liberalism?”<sup>65</sup>. Therefore, he did not highlight what had been the great novelty of French liberalism in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the great contribution of those thinkers to the theory of liberalism: that of having reflected on the concept of freedom in the light of the revolutionary phenomenon and of having highlighted the danger of the emerging of new forms of despotism (such as the Terror and Napoleonic Caesarism), even more dangerous than the pre-revolutionary ones, because they are based on the instrumental appeal to popular sovereignty. Alongside the idea of liberalism as a theory of the limits of power, alongside the essential issue of the *extent* of power to be limited by constitution, in the French liberals the idea that the *ownership* of power in no way guaranteed that the individual was protected from the abuses of authority was clearly present. This basically denounced a profound distrust of the democratic principle of the sovereignty of the people, which at the limit was interpreted by them, generically, as consensus. On the question of the origin of power, in fact, post-revolutionary French liberalism had certainly not innovated the political philosophy, since the concept of consensus was already present in natural law philosophers. But the task of that liberalism had been another: to highlight the possible degeneration of democracy.

It is difficult to explain why Bobbio did not fully recognize the historical importance of Constant's liberalism in his essay on Benedetto Croce. This appears even more surprising if we consider that, on the contrary, in other essays in *Politics and Culture* he took up some of Constant's arguments, to refute the idea that the communists were trying to affirm: that egalitarian freedom was a *libertas maior* compared to liberal freedom. In an article published in the magazine “Nuovi Argomenti”, Galvano Della Volpe, one of the most prominent communist intellectuals, accused Bobbio of having re-proposed in his essay *Democrazia e dittatura (Democracy and dictatorship)*<sup>66</sup> an “old tune”, an ancient dispute, the one carried on by Constant precisely, which saw democratic freedom and liberal freedom as opposed. Della Volpe, on the other hand, argued that democratic,

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<sup>64</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>65</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>66</sup> N. Bobbio, ‘Democrazia e dittatura’, *Nuovi Argomenti*, 6 (1954), pp. 3-14; then republished in Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 148-159.

or rather, socialist freedom, as a superior freedom, was destined to absorb and eliminate liberal freedom<sup>67</sup>. Bobbio replied with the essay *Della libertà dei moderni comparata a quella dei posteri* (*On the freedom of moderns compared to that of posterity*) in which he declared that he did not reject the comparison with Constant at all and affirmed that far from being an ancient dispute, it was instead a question of current interest: if for the French liberals of the Restoration the question had been “mostly theoretical” and had taken as a polemical target the Rousseau’s thought<sup>68</sup>, in the early 1950s “the problem of non-liberal or totalitarian democracy” was “a real problem, just as real as it was, at the time of the Restoration, that of an undemocratic liberalism”<sup>69</sup>.

Thus, precisely in the wake of Constant, Bobbio defined two concepts of freedom very clearly: the first, that of the liberals, is freedom as a “non-impediment” coinciding with the “sphere of what, being neither commanded nor prohibited, is permitted”; the second, that of the democrats, can be defined as “autonomy” and coincides with “the power to give norms to oneself and not to obey norms other than those given to oneself”<sup>70</sup>. As it can be seen, with this distinction Bobbio anticipated, in this essay of 1954, what Isaiah Berlin would theorize in a paradigmatic way only four years later in the famous conference entitled *Two Concepts of Liberty*<sup>71</sup>. Indeed, in an article a few months later, in response this time to Roderigo di Castiglia (pseudonym of PCI Secretary Palmiro Togliatti), this time opposing liberal freedom and socialist freedom, Bobbio completed this conceptualization using the same terminology that would have been brought to success from Berlin. In fact, he defined “negative freedom” that “faculty to do or not to do” which coincides with freedom as non-impediment and “positive freedom” the “power to do”, the “freedom to do something” as it was commonly understood by the socialists<sup>72</sup>.

Having defined the two meanings of freedom, Bobbio affirmed that they were both legitimate, “each in its own sphere”, and it was improper and useless to discuss which of the two freedoms was “true freedom” or which of the two the “better”<sup>73</sup>. Initially, Bobbio seemed, therefore, to want to evade the problem of the relationship between the two freedoms. However, shortly after, wanting to refute the idea of egalitarian freedom as *libertas maior* with respect to civil liberty, he resumed Constant's critique of Rousseau, underlining the difficulty of realizing the most complete autonomy in practice: even in the most democratic State, on the one hand “those who take the most demanding decisions for the political direction are not all the citizens but a small representation of

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<sup>67</sup> G. della Volpe, ‘Comunismo e democrazia moderna’, *Nuovi Argomenti*, 7 (1954), pp. 131-142.

<sup>68</sup> It can be emphasized, for the record, that the anti-democratic dispute carried on by the post-revolutionary French liberals and by Constant in particular was not merely theoretical. In my opinion, even in this case, Bobbio underestimated the historical value of Constant liberalism, on the one hand by downplaying the disruptive effect of the Terror (“brief but extremely efficient episode in scandalizing the moderates”), on the other by not recognizing that the critics to democracy originated not only in opposition to Jacobinism, but also to the exploitation of popular sovereignty that had occurred during the Napoleonic regime.

<sup>69</sup> N. Bobbio, ‘Della libertà dei moderni comparata a quella dei posteri’, *Nuovi Argomenti*, 11 (1954), pp. 54-86, then republished in Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, op. cit., Ref. 1, pp. 163-164.

<sup>70</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>71</sup> I. Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1958.

<sup>72</sup> N. Bobbio, ‘Libertà e potere’, *Nuovi Argomenti*, 14 (1954), pp. 1-23, then republished in Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, op. cit., Ref. 1, pp. 272-275.

<sup>73</sup> Bobbio, ‘Della libertà dei moderni comparata a quella dei posteri’, op. cit., Ref. 69, pp. 173-174.

them”, on the other hand these decisions are taken by majority vote<sup>74</sup>. In addition to this, Bobbio concluded that, in order to be effective, freedom-autonomy necessarily presupposed the existence of freedom as a non-impediment since “an autonomous deliberation” on laws “can only be formed in an atmosphere of freedom as a non-impediment”<sup>75</sup>.

Even in the comparison with Togliatti, Bobbio seemed to place liberal freedom as the premise of democratic freedom, thus assigning it a priority status: “freedom, as the power to do something, interests those who are its lucky possessors, freedom as a non-impediment all men, even those who should become the holders of the new powers, established by a social regime other than the bourgeois one”<sup>76</sup>. In the particular context of Italy in the early 1950s, it was no small feat to defend liberal freedom in this way from communist attacks. However, as can be seen, Bobbio carefully avoided defining it explicitly as *libertas maior*. Precisely to avoid that his speech ended up investing the level of values, he drew consequences only on the institutional level: “democratic institutions (first of all universal suffrage and political representation) are therefore a corrective, an integration, an improvement of liberal institutions; they are neither a substitution nor an overcoming of it”. His objective was evidently that of identifying the ideal regime in liberal democracy, “the only form of effective democracy”<sup>77</sup>. Bobbio intended liberalism as something consubstantial with democracy<sup>78</sup>. But liberalism could be compatible with democracy only on condition that it was considered in its constitutional and, so to speak, “technical” meaning. “It is very easy” he wrote again in response to Togliatti, “to get rid of liberalism if one identifies it with a theory and practice of freedom as power (in particular that of the bourgeoisie) but it is much more difficult to get rid of it when it is considered as the theory and practice of the limits of the State power”<sup>79</sup>.

It can be noted, with regard to the relationship between the two concepts of freedom, that Bobbio limited himself to identifying in Constant the one who had simply and clearly distinguished between the freedom of the ancients and the moderns. On the other hand, he did not dwell in any way on the final part of the the discourse *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes*, in which Constant invited us to combine the two freedoms and not to underestimate the importance of political freedom, which on the one hand is a “guarantee” of civil freedom and for the other an indispensable ethical ferment that prevents freedom from restricting itself to a narrow, private sphere. This is a thesis that could have been used by Bobbio to support his own project of theorising liberal democracy as an ideal regime. There is no doubt, however, that he saw in Constant, not so differently from Marxist intellectuals, a bourgeois thinker.

After all, there was an aspect of Constant's liberalism (and of classical liberalism in general) that Bobbio avoided highlighting: the fundamental importance of economic

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<sup>74</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>75</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>76</sup> Bobbio, *Libertà e potere*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 72, p. 278.

<sup>77</sup> Bobbio, *Della libertà dei moderni comparata a quella dei posteri*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 69, pp. 177-178.

<sup>78</sup> On Bobbio's democratic vision see in this issue David Ragazzoni's essay.

<sup>79</sup> Bobbio, *Libertà e potere*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 72, p. 278.

freedom and private property. In the essay *On the liberty of moderns compared to that of posterity*, while considering the distinction made by Constant between individual liberty and political liberty as paradigmatic, Bobbio did not take into consideration one of the rights of liberty that Constant considered proper to that private sphere in which authority has no right to enter: private property. In his famous *Discourse*, in fact, in describing the liberty of moderns, Constant had inserted, alongside the judicial guarantees, freedom of opinion, movement, association and religious freedom, also the right of each person to “to dispose of its property and also to abuse it”. For sure Constant understood private property as a social convention and therefore as axiologically subordinate to other freedoms, but he certainly did not consider it any less sacred.

This avoidance by Bobbio of the issue of private property as the cornerstone of liberalism should not come as a surprise. His goal in *Politics and Culture* was to demonstrate the possibility of reconciling liberalism not only with democracy, but also with Marxism. To do this, once again, he resorted above all to the reasoning of a historian of ideas, identifying in both currents a common root, the same that he had already opposed to the idealistic conception of freedom: Natural Law-Enlightenment. The great fracture of modernity according to Bobbio had occurred thanks to a “new way of reading in the book of nature and of learning the lesson of experience that belonged to a new type of man of culture, the natural philosopher”<sup>80</sup>. Thus, if liberalism was placed in continuity with respect to natural law, Marxism was placed on the line of the Enlightenment and therefore both were part of that long path, which began at the end of the sixteenth century, of emancipation of the individual “from religious and popular prejudices, of that ambitious faith in science, which had led to the regulation of nature”<sup>81</sup>. It has rightly been observed that in unilaterally emphasizing the link between Enlightenment philosophy and Marx's thought and in considering it as the highest expression of modern thought, Bobbio left in the shadow another important component of Marxism, namely its “eschatological-messianic spirit” of organicistic-romantic derivation which placed “science at the service of the new faith”<sup>82</sup> and which obviously was totally irreconcilable with a liberal vision of the world.

Wanting to establish a continuity between liberalism and Marxism, it was evident that Bobbio was forced to exclude private property and economic freedom from the fundamental nucleus of liberalism. However, this approach did not respond only to contingent objectives, that is to the desire to establish, in that particular historical context, a dialogue between two opposite worlds. In Bobbio there was the conviction that civil liberty was fully compatible with a collectivist economic system. If on the theoretical level, relating to the philosophical roots of liberalism, as mentioned, he had clearly clarified his entire distance from Croce, from the practical point of view, relating to the relationship between freedom and the economic system, his position was still strongly influenced by it. In the aforementioned essay on *Constant and Jellinek*, Croce

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<sup>80</sup> Bobbio, *Invito al colloquio*, op. cit., Ref. 44, pp. 24-25.

<sup>81</sup> Bobbio, *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>82</sup> R. Giannetti, ‘Quale liberalismo? L'idea liberale nel pensiero di Norberto Bobbio’, in Camparini and Crivellini (Eds), *Liberalismo e democrazia nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra*, op. cit., p. 107.

had underlined the ethical and not at all economicistic character of Constant's liberalism; in the controversy with Luigi Einaudi on liberalism and "liberism", but also in *Ethics and politics* and in the *History of Europe*, referring to the bipartition of the philosophy of the practical spirit that gave rise on the one hand to the philosophy of the practical or economy and on the other to moral or ethics philosophy, he explained that freedom, belonging to the moral moment, could flourish in any economic order. Bobbio in *Politics and culture* somehow ended up drawing the same consequences as Croce. Distinguishing political liberalism and economic liberalism, on the one hand, he extended a hand to the communist culture, on the other he argued with those liberals who refused prejudicially the principles of the planned economy. Moreover, despite having long since abandoned the path of personalism, despite having revised the philosophical bases of his own liberalism thanks to the landing of natural law and individualism, Bobbio continued to pursue the project that had involved him over the years between the Resistance and the postwar period, the one around which the Action Party was formed: favoring a reconciliation between freedom and equality, between freedom and justice, founding a liberal society that went beyond the market economy.

## Abstract

This essay aims to reconstruct the "genetic" phase of Norberto Bobbio's research on liberalism, through the theoretical confrontation he developed with some reference liberal authors, which we usually call "classics". The paper reconstructs, first of all, the path of Bobbio from the years of his liberal formation, which took place in the sign of the works of Croce, to the first gradual departure from the Crocian concept of freedom during the years of the Resistance, thanks also to the militancy in the Action Party. Immediately after the Liberation of Italy from the Nazi-Fascist occupation and after the end of the Second World War, also thanks to the encounter with Karl Popper's work, Bobbio's arrival to the methodological individualism took place as well as the definitive departure from the idealistic and Crocian conception of freedom. The systematic criticism he addressed, after Croce's death in 1952, to his conception of liberalism, was developed in the volume *Politics and culture*, a crucial work to understand what the philosophical foundations of liberalism are according to Bobbio. The interpretation he gave in this work of Benjamin Constant's thought is important for two different reasons: the first one is that, starting from Constant, Bobbio anticipated as early as 1954 the famous Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty; the second one is that this interpretation is fundamental to highlight the particularity and the anomaly of Bobbio's liberalism.

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