

POLITICS

## Tainted heroes

RICHARD BELLAMY

Fabio Fernando Rizi

BENEDETTO CROCE AND  
ITALIAN FASCISM

321pp. University of Toronto Press. Can\$60,  
distributed in the UK by Plymbridge. £40.  
0 8020 3762 3

Elizabeth Leake

THE REINVENTION OF  
IGNAZIO SILONE

200pp. University of Toronto Press. Can\$50,  
distributed in the UK by Plymbridge. £32.  
0 8020 8767 1

In the twentieth century, the touchstone of a writer's intellectual and moral integrity was his attitude towards and dealings with the authoritarian regimes of Left and Right. Up to now, most attention has focused on the obvious figures on the Right, such as Pound, D'Annunzio, Heidegger or Gentile, who openly supported Fascism. Here the issue has been how far their writings as a whole are tainted by their political sympathies. Increasingly, however, the opening up of relevant archives and the assiduous burrowings of scholars have revealed more surprising and often more complex cases.

These authors either never expressed particular political opinions or had been avowedly, even prominently, members of the opposition. The revelations that they collaborated with or supported the authorities seem like the transgressions of an apparently loving but adulterous husband. As with adultery, their sins lie hidden from view, often unknown to friends or family and at variance with their expressed beliefs and apparent commitments and personalities. They also seem deeply private and secret failings, that have had to be excavated from within official or personal papers and correspondence. The obvious temptation for hard-working scholars is to believe that they have uncovered the deep structure of their subject's thought: The work becomes either an atonement for, or an expression of, the author's guilt. Even if true, though, it remains debatable how far these flawed motivations detract from the work.

Both Benedetto Croce and Ignazio Silone were significant intellectual critics of Fascism (and Communism). Yet, for very different reasons, their personal opinions or actions have been regarded as being at variance with what they said and wrote. Of the two cases, Croce's is by some way the more straightforward. Up to and immediately following Mussolini's March on Rome in 1922, Croce followed most of the conservative liberal establishment in supporting the Fascists as the lesser of two evils in their struggle with the Socialists and Communists. It was only in 1924, when they explicitly began to establish a new Fascist regime to replace the liberal political system, that he went into open opposition. However, his eminence and the fact that he was able to remain in Italy, being saved by his private wealth from any need to compromise with the regime, soon made him the most prominent anti-Fascist intellectual – praised, despite their disagreements, even by Communists such as Gramsci. All of this is common knowledge, with many of the relevant documents being published by Croce himself. The key issue has always been whether that earlier support was simply an expression of Croce's personal political conservatism or had deeper philosophical roots – whether, in reality, as his erstwhile friend and close collaborator turned-Fascist ideologue, Giovanni Gentile, put it, "the entire philosophical education and the constant and most profound inspiration of Croce's thought make him a hard-line Fascist without the black shirt". Most commentators have regarded this view as going too far. Rather, the majority of critics, myself included, have argued that Croce's realist view of politics and his opposition to what he saw as the moralism of all notions of rights or justice sat uneasily with his liberalism. Indeed, he made important modifications to his political thought after 1924 in order to elaborate an explicitly liberal philosophy that attempted to address these sorts of objections.

Fabio Fernando Rizi is not a historian of ideas or a philosopher and, despite his occa-

sional claims to do so, he does not really deal with this critique. Instead, he focuses on the hitherto largely undisputed personal issue and seeks to show that Croce was not simply an arm-chair conservative intellectual, as Dennis Mack Smith and others have characterized him. I am not sure he fully tackles this argument either. At both a personal and an intellectual level, Croce was always very open to scholars from across the ideological and indeed methodological spectrum, especially younger ones. That he met and, in small yet significant ways, helped many in the opposition who lacked his standing and resources is well known, though Rizi is to be commended for having detailed these contacts. However, none of these details leads me to reconsider my view either of Croce's philosophy or his personal political views. Indeed, the truly significant personality trait that distinguished him from, say, Gentile, is something less political and more subtle that goes unnoticed by Rizi. Croce, unlike Gentile, was born into a moderately wealthy and important family – his status was secure. He did not even take a degree, let alone seek a university post or any other official position or honour, though he was appointed a senator and was briefly the Minister of Education. Essentially, he was a loner who liked being an outsider. In this respect, he was always the opposite to Gentile, who craved recognition and needed a school of followers. By the First World War, Croce had begun to be written off as a past master whose "system" was finished and was there to be criticized by the new generation, his opposition to Italy's entry into the War having earned him considerable unpopularity. He freely confessed that opposition to Fascism gave him a new lease of life, not least by reconnecting him to the Young Turks of the anti-establishment who were among the leading lights of the anti-Fascist movement. The strength of his liberalism was likewise its championing of continuous intellectual critique; its weakness the failure to explore adequately the political and other resources those less privileged than he might require to live by these ideals. To that extent, the philosophy and the person seem of a piece, as does the early personal support for and later profound philosophical opposition to Fascism.

Silone's story is far more complicated, though once again it is less political affiliations per se than personal psychology, this time feelings of insecurity, that probably explain his choices. Largely through his novels, Silone established a reputation as the anti-authoritarian par excellence – opposed equally

to Stalinism, having been expelled from the Italian Communist Party in 1931 for voicing his concerns and Fascism. In its place, he put forward a form of Christian socialism that appeared to place individual moral integrity at its core with his fictional heroes and, by thinly veiled implication, himself, becoming almost Christ-like figures. However, in 1996 it was revealed that roughly from 1919 to 1930 he had supplied information about his former comrades to a Fascist contact who eventually worked for the secret police. The motivations behind Silone's betrayal remain obscure; personal, financial and political elements can all be adduced, but none is clear-cut. All that does seem clear is that he entered and left the service of Communism and Fascism more or less simultaneously, and that he attempted thereafter to lead or at least portray a new life, free from falsehood and duplicity, and dedicated to helping the workers and peasants. This plan was outlined in his last known letter to his Fascist contact and described there as a means to "redeem myself".

Reaction to these revelations ranged from the gloating, on the far Left and Right, to disbelief, among the moderate Left – with some supporters declaring the Fascists had deliberately made up this exchange in order to discredit him. In *The Reinvention of Ignazio Silone* Elizabeth Leake deftly disputes both these extremes. Her account of Silone's reinvention is careful and

convincing, with the analysis and redating of the largely forgotten collection of stories *Un viaggio a Parigi* (Journey to Paris) being particularly interesting. Though published in 1934, a year later than *Fontamara* (the novel that made his name), she dates this work to 1929–30, when Silone was deciding to make his break, and suggests that this psychological dilemma is reflected in the ambivalence of the story's protagonist, whose doubts and mistakes make him unique among Silone's fictional heroes. The later novels can be seen from this point of view as an attempt to live up to his declared plan in his writings at least, even if he personally continued the falsehood and duplicity about his past. Though Silone's books have always been popular in both Italian and in translation, critics have often regarded them as unsophisticated and excessively proselytizing. Through Leake's interpretation, they now gain a certain psychological depth by virtue of reintroducing the equivocation Silone sought to expunge.

Most people would probably wish to imagine themselves as perceptively and bravely opposing what hardly anyone now doubts were atrocious regimes. Such wishful thinking perhaps explains why people have wanted to protect intellectual heroes, such as Croce and Silone, from any suggestion that they might have erred. The fact is, few are so far-sighted or courageous. To realize that even intelligent individuals can be mistaken and weak, yet however imperfectly seek to rectify those errors and make amends, is ultimately more salutary than tales of unsullied heroes.