

BENJAMIN CONSTANT'S LIBERALISM
AND ITALIAN ANTI-FASCISM (1925-1945):
BETWEEN CROCE AND THE *PARTITO D'AZIONE*

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ABSTRACT

During the period of the fascist dictatorship and the Resistance, the different interpretations of Benjamin Constant's thought acquired a certain political value based on the different conceptions of freedom proposed by the various currents of Italian anti-fascism. Constant's success among liberal-inspired Italian anti-fascists is mainly due to the peculiar portrait Benedetto Croce drew of him in *Storia d'Europa* and in his famous article *Constant e Jellinek*: that of the theorist of a freedom that was not economicistic but ethical. Adolfo Omodeo starts from here to outline the traits of a liberal-democratic Constant that in fact refutes the reactionary interpretation previously proposed by Guido De Ruggiero in *Storia del liberalismo europeo*. Croce and Omodeo thus paved the way for the interpretations of *Partito d'Azione* intellectuals such as Dionisotti, Venturi and Calogero. Especially the last two, in the peculiar context of the Resistance, make Constant a champion of progressivism. But to propose a liberal-revolutionary Constant or in favour of forms of democracy that also include the pursuit of social justice is to misrepresent his ideas, to no longer place oneself on the plane of the simple interpretation of his thought, but to use it instrumentally to pursue political ends.

Keywords: Liberalism, Democracy, Social justice, Anti-fascism, Croce, *Partito d'Azione*.

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INTRODUCTION

As is well known, the great classics are such because their works speak to different generations of scholars. This is also true for Benjamin Constant, although only in the last forty years he has actually found a prominent place in the textbooks of history of political thought as a link between Montesquieu and Rousseau on the one hand and Tocqueville on the other. For a long time, in fact, he was burdened with numerous prejudices that relegated him to the rank of a minor polemicist, of a simple author of circumstantial writings without any real theoretical value, of a character too much immersed in the mediocrity of the two ages of which he was a protagonist, the Directory and the Restoration.¹ The rediscovery of his political thought took place from the 1980s onwards with the publication of the great unpublished theoretical treatises of the consular-imperial period, *Principes de politique applicables à tous les gouvernements* (Constant 1980 [1806]) and *Fragments d'un ouvrage abandonné sur la possibilité d'une constitution républicaine dans un grand pays* (Constant 1991 [1803-1810]). The so-called *Constant Renaissance* radically changed Constant's image: it became clear not only that he was indeed to be considered a classic of liberalism, but that the various interpretations of his thinking constituted an important chapter in the broad debate on the relationship between liberalism and democracy that developed between the second half of the 1980s and the early 2000s with the decline of the great ideologies.² Italy also contributed significantly to this rediscovery thanks to scholars such as Mauro Barberis, Stefano De Luca and Giovanni Paoletti.³

But the fortune of Benjamin Constant's political thought in Italy has a much longer history, which has not gone unnoticed by scholars, but has not yet been the subject of systematic studies. Rarely, in fact, those who have dealt with it have gone beyond a history of criticism or a review of the Italian language editions of his writings,⁴ while the political value of this fortune has remained largely unexplored.⁵ The history of Constant's

¹ On the different nature of the prejudices Constant was subjected to cf. BARBERIS 1988: 7-13.

² For a reconstruction of the steps of this *Constant Renaissance* and of the debate on liberalism and democracy see DE LUCA 1997.

³ Cf. BARBERIS 1988; PAOLETTI 2001; DE LUCA 2003.

⁴ Cf. CORDIÉ 1964. See also the subsequent additions to the same work in the same journal in 1967, 1969, 1971, 1976, 1982, 1983. Some aspects of Constant's Italian fortune can also be found in CORDIÉ 1946; VIOLI 1985.

⁵ With regard to the Resistance and post-war period, some mention of the political implications of Constant's (and Madame de Staël's and Tocqueville's) fortunes can be found in

reception in Italy began when the author was still alive, in the 1820s, thanks to the first Italian translations of the *Cours de politique constitutionnelle* (1818), also containing the famous *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes* (Constant 1820), and the *Commentaire sur l'ouvrage de Filangieri* (Constant 1826 [1822-1824]); only these two works by Constant, apart from the independent literary fortune of the novel *Adolphe*,⁶ were translated into Italian throughout the 19th century. It would certainly be fruitful to investigate the reception of Constant's political ideas in the liberal authors of 19th century Italy, e.g. in the early Romantics gathered around the journal *Il Conciliatore*, or in the authors of moderatism such as D'Azeglio, Gioberti, Balbo, but in this essay I will focus my attention on a delimited period of the 20th century: that one between Fascism and the Resistance. It is precisely in this phase of Italian history, in fact, that I believe Constant actually acquires the status of a classic: faced with the fascist dictatorship and called upon after its fall to work for the civil rebirth of Italy, historians and philosophers take an interest in his political thought and through him reflect on the concepts of freedom and democracy. Constant becomes for these intellectuals a very useful tool to understand the reality they are living and for us a litmus test to better understand the political positioning of those who read and interpret his thought.

1. CONSTANT AND LIBERALISM IN THE 1920S AND 1930S: FROM DE RUGGIERO TO CROCE

The year 1925 can be considered the starting point of Constant's fortune among Italian anti-fascists not so much for the publication of Guido De Ruggiero's *Storia del liberalismo europeo*, but for Benedetto Croce's definitive distance from Fascism, with the publication of the *Manifesto degli intellettuali antifascisti* and the beginning of the theorisation of his philosophy of freedom. De Ruggiero's work, moreover, constitutes a rather particular example of reconstruction of the history of liberalism: in fact, he exalts the German liberal tradition, which in his opinion "offers, against appearances, a particular historical interest, not only for the great historical elevation of its doctrinal expressions, but also for the singularity of

De Francesco's great volume on interpretations of the French Revolution in the 20th century in Italy. Cf. DE FRANCESCO 2006: 290-295.

⁶ Confirming its popularity, an opera libretto entitled *Hèllera* (named after the novel's female protagonist, Ellénore) by Luigi Illica and set to music by Italo Montemezzi was also adapted from *Adolphe*. Cf. URAS 2012.

its development".⁷ Bobbio has rightly written that, somewhat surprisingly, in *Storia del liberalismo europeo* "the two most important thinkers mentioned in the chapter on German liberalism are Hegel and Treitschke" and that Hegel's thought is placed by De Ruggiero at the centre of the history of liberalism because it draws "from Kant's identification of freedom with the spirit the idea of an organic development of freedom".⁸

Regarding French liberalism in the early 19th century, De Ruggiero sketches an image of it that is in many ways banal and certainly with little appeal for Italian intellectuals opposed to Fascism; although he recognises its contribution in terms of constitutionalism, he emphasises its limits due to its "distinctly conservative character".⁹ In fact, he likens Constant's thinking to that of the *doctrinaires* Royer-Collard and Guizot and the *idéologues* Daunou and Destutt de Tracy: these authors, in his opinion, "all repeat themselves".¹⁰ De Ruggiero highlights the importance of Constant's distinction between the liberty of the ancients and the liberty of the moderns, but he calls it "fallacious", "like all historical oppositions that are too severed".¹¹ He also argues that Constant "vigorously opposes" the liberty of the ancients: in doing so, however, De Ruggiero does not consider that although in *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes* the liberty of the moderns is placed on an axiologically higher plane than that of the ancients, political freedom is not devalued at all, but is defined as a guarantee of individual freedom. Anticipating an interpretation that will be typical of Marxist literature during the Cold War,¹² De Ruggiero wishes to emphasise that Constant "shares with all the liberal writers of the Restoration an implacable hatred against democracy" and that in these authors even the term "'privilege', once hated, acquires a certain flavour of distinction and seduction".¹³ These are statements that the studies of recent decades have long since convincingly rejected: while Constant is certainly opposed to the 'substantial' democracy desired by the Jacobins and to any form of instrumentalisation of popular sovereignty, he admits that the latter is the only legitimate origin of power. Moreover, it should always be remembered that Constant is a lifelong supporter of the inspiring principles of the Revolution of 1789: he is therefore opposed to

⁷ DE RUGGIERO 2003: 223.

⁸ BOBBIO 1980: 254.

⁹ DE RUGGIERO 2003: 181.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 173.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 177.

¹² See for instance CERRONI 1970.

¹³ DE RUGGIERO 2003: 178.

any form of privilege and does not conceive of private property in this way either.

If Italian antifascists had taken De Ruggiero's interpretation at face value, they would probably have had no reason to turn to Constant, as they did, in the years of the struggle for liberation. Much more than De Ruggiero's *Storia del liberalismo europeo*, the interpretations of Croce and Adolfo Omodeo, one of his favourite disciples, would decisively orientate the debate among anti-fascist intellectuals interested in Constant.

It is superfluous to emphasise the historical and theoretical importance of Benedetto Croce's reflections during the fascist 'Ventennio' and the years of the Resistance: as is well known, the elaboration of his philosophical theory of freedom lasted almost fifteen years starting with the publication in 1925 of the *Manifesto degli intellettuali antifascisti* and the short article *Liberalismo* in the journal *La Critica*, continuing in the two-year period 1927-1928 with a series of essays collected in *Aspetti morali della vita politica* (1928), and subsequently with his so-called 'trilogy of freedom': *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915* (1928), *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono* (1932), *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (1938). As is well known, Croce theorises a metapolitical version of liberalism: he conceives freedom on the one hand as an explanatory principle of the historical course, and on the other hand as humanity's moral ideal. History, as a product of the spirit, is understood by him as a continuous development, a continuous renewal by the free creativity of human beings. Deeply convinced of the impossibility of freedom disappearing from the world, since this would be tantamount to the extinction of history itself, Croce in the years of the fascist dictatorship argues that no matter how dark the present may appear, freedom is nevertheless always destined to triumph. In this sense, freedom is for him not only the criterion for understanding history, but also the moral principle that should guide human action: acting morally means fighting for freedom to triumph in all fields.¹⁴

This is not the place to go over in detail his vision of history as the "story of liberty", which also presupposes an emblematic interpretation of the 18th and 19th centuries revolutions. Here I'm interested in emphasising one point: we have to ascribe to Croce's intellectual calibre and to his role as the brightest beacon for freedom during the years of the dictatorship the return of attention to the French liberal tradition, to the detriment of the English tradition, in his opinion too dried up by the instances of utilitarianism, and above all to the detriment of the German liberal tradition, which until then

¹⁴ On Croce's liberalism the obligatory reference is BOBBIO 1980. Cf. also SETTA 1979: 14-26; ROBERTS 1982; BELLAMY 1991; SARTORI 1997; BEDESCHI 2002: 270-280.

had found fertile ground among Italian intellectuals. As Bobbio argues, Croce is “more circumspect and more balanced” than De Ruggiero: he does not allow himself “to be misled by his admiration for Hegel to the point of making him the philosopher par excellence of liberalism” and indeed criticises his “conception of the ethicality of the State”.¹⁵ In the first chapter of *Storia d'Europa*, Croce states that Hegel “for certain of his political tendencies and theorisations, deserved to be designated rather as ‘servil’ than ‘liberal’”.¹⁶ Instead, he attributes to Madame de Staël a place of honour, “higher” than Hegel, as a representative of the liberal “thought of the new age”.¹⁷ More than Germany, therefore, Croce looks to France – not only to the political thought of the members of the ‘Coppet group’, but also to that of *doctrinaires* such as Royer-Collard – to trace the origins of European liberalism and the romantic conception of freedom that he would make his own.

The rediscovery, thanks to Croce, of the liberal classics of early 19th-century France, especially in the period of greatest solidity of the fascist regime between the late 1920s and early 1930s, assumed a very precise political value: that of opposing the rhetoric of a Fascism that represented itself as an opposing force to plutocratic France and that interpreted “under the sign of distortion the season opened up by 1789 and culminating in the Great War”.¹⁸ In response to the fascist vulgate, Croce read 19th century European history according to the criterion of continuity, aiming to link the 1789 Revolution to the July Revolution and “Enlightenment culture to developments in nationality”.¹⁹ On the basis of this interpretation, liberalism is by no means responsible for the decadence and corruption of European civilisation, as fascist intellectuals argue.

The intentions, both theoretical and political, that guide Croce in the theorisation of his liberalism, are the same as those underlying his use of Benjamin Constant’s political thought, to whom he assigns a prominent place in the picture sketched in *Storia d'Europa*. The first chapter opens, as is well known, with a description of the broad movement, at once political, philosophical, spiritual and cultural, that throughout Europe, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic era, infused consciences with the “religion of liberty”. This word, ‘freedom’, is certainly not new, but in the generation living during the Restoration it began to indicate “a concept of

¹⁵ BOBBIO 1980: 254.

¹⁶ CROCE 1965: 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 13.

¹⁸ DE FRANCESCO 2006: 290.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 289.

vital importance, a clarifier of the past and present, a guide to the future".²⁰ According to Croce, this conceptual novelty is first grasped by Sismondi and Benjamin Constant, with the famous distinction between the liberty of the ancients and the liberty of the moderns. But however indicative of the new widespread feeling, the theory of the two liberties carries with it the "risk of getting lost in abstractions, dividing individual and state, civil liberty and political liberty, liberty of the individual and liberty of the other individuals in which that liberty finds its limit".²¹

To understand this critique of Constant's two-freedom theory, it is worth briefly recalling Croce's partitioning of philosophy, which, as a "theory of the spirit", is divided into theoretical spirit and practical spirit. The theoretical spirit is distinguished into "intuition", which gives rise to the philosophy of art or aesthetics, and "concept", which gives rise to logic; the practical spirit, on the other hand, gives rise on the one hand to the philosophy of utility or economics and on the other to moral or ethical philosophy. In this fourfold partition, freedom falls within the realm of ethics; furthermore, there is no place for an autonomous philosophy of law, which, as a philosophy of practice, does not belong to the moral moment and necessarily falls, according to Croce, within economic activity. The partition of Croce's philosophy, moreover, also places politics on a subordinate level as a non-moral and therefore economic practical activity: an aspect that, as we will see, will play a not secondary role in the debate that will open between the philosopher and the exponents of the *Partito d'Azione* in the aftermath of the fall of Fascism. This explains, therefore, why Croce criticises Constant's theory of the two liberties: the risk of abstractness, according to him, reappears every time "someone tries to define the idea of freedom by means of juridical distinctions, which are of a practical nature and refer to particular and transient institutions, and not to that superior and supreme idea that encompasses and surpasses them all".²²

In *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, Croce further insists on his critique: the idea of freedom is conceived by Constant (and by Sismondi) as "new and proper to the age that had then opened"; but if it is admissible, Croce explains, "in constructing historical periods"²³ to distinguish an ancient liberty and a modern liberty, it is an error "to believe that the two liberties, so distinct by classification, are really distinguishable": if this could be done, it would mean "either that one of the two would not be liberty

²⁰ CROCE 1965: 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 10.

²² *Ibid.*: 10.

²³ CROCE 1973: 224.

or both would be imprecise expressions of a single superior liberty".²⁴ In short, on the one hand Croce warns against believing that freedom can have had its absolute beginning in a given epoch – for example in the 19th century – because all history is the story of liberty, on the other hand he maintains that “freedom is not a contingent fact, but an idea”²⁵ and as such must be conceived “without any other determination, because any other addition” would obscure the concept.²⁶

This purity of the idea of freedom, this liberty ‘without adjectives’, this conceiving of it as humanity’s moral ideal, thus leads Croce to deny that on a philosophical level there can exist two different concepts of liberty, one, the ancient one, to be understood as political liberty and the other, the modern one, to be understood as civil liberty. Nevertheless, in a short article destined for lasting success entitled *Constant e Jellinek: intorno alla differenza tra libertà degli antichi e quella dei moderni*²⁷ he points out that Constant looks with distrust on ancient liberty, but rightly imputes this attitude to his “repugnance against Jacobinism and the reign of terror”;²⁸ instead, he emphasises that, although there is in Constant’s thought a priority of the liberty of the moderns over that of the ancients, for him freedom as participation is nevertheless “a necessary moment of the broader one that is ours”;²⁹ this statement thus shows that Croce is not at all unaware of what Constant denounces regarding the “privatistic” danger inherent in modern liberty. Indeed, quoting the Swiss thinker’s own words in a footnote, Croce seems implicitly to want to spur the Italians under the fascist yoke.³⁰

In any case, for Croce, Constant’s originality does not lie in the distinction between these two liberties, but in having conceived the liberty of moderns as “totality” and “universality of feeling and doing free”, as something that does not aim at the happiness of individuals, but “is directed towards human perfection, and, in short, is not hedonistic but ethical”.³¹ Bobbio rightly observed that Croce dwells in this way on “a secondary aspect” of the issue, he misrepresents the objectives pursued by

²⁴ *Ibid.*: 225.

²⁵ *Ibid.*: 225.

²⁶ CROCE 1965: 15.

²⁷ CROCE 1931. On the limits of Croce’s interpretation of Constant, cf. BOBBIO 1980: 247-249.

²⁸ BOBBIO 1980: 295.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 296.

³⁰ *Le danger de la liberté moderne c’est qu’absorbés dans la jouissance de notre indépendance privée, et dans la poursuite de nos intérêts particuliers, nous ne renoncions trop facilement à notre droit de partage dans le pouvoir politique.* Cf. *ibid.*: 296.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 294.

Constant and describes the idea of modern liberty “as he, Croce, would have understood it”.³² This characterisation is, moreover, fully consistent with the general framework of Croce’s philosophy of liberty: in the same years he counteracts the image of a liberalism conceived only in economic terms, taking a position in the famous polemic with Luigi Einaudi on the difference between liberalism and “liberismo”.

In the article *Constant e Jellinek*, moreover, Croce does not fail once again to warn “against the intrusion of legal concepts into the field of philosophy”; he attacks Jellinek for having used the concepts of political liberty and civil liberty that Constant had developed only as “instruments”, and for having changed them “from practical and legal distinctions into logical distinctions”,³³ arguing that the only difference between the two liberties is that for the moderns liberty is expressly recognised by the state, whereas for the ancients a legislative expression of liberty has always been lacking. He reproaches Jellinek, therefore, for having replaced the problem posed by Constant in philosophical and historical terms with a “pseudo-historical construction” and for having conceived this distinction by calling into question the relations between the individual and the State, which in reality – Croce explains – have importance in positive law, but none in philosophy or in the “effected reality” of history.³⁴ Beyond the criticism of Jellinek, this stance by Croce clarifies an essential element of his interpretation of Constant and, consequently, of his philosophy of liberalism: he misses the essential point of Constant’s theory, namely the fact that the liberty of moderns coincides with the idea of independence from state power. In short, his interpretation of Constant’s political thought confirms how far Croce is from identifying the true core of liberalism in the theory and practice of the limits of state power.

2. OMODEO’S STUDIES ON RESTORATION: A LIBERAL-DEMOCRATIC CONSTANT

Adolfo Omodeo starts from a historiographical approach very similar to Croce’s during the years of the Second World War, when “the fanatical fury of nationalisms and iron dictatorships denying all free life roared around”.³⁵ His studies dedicated to the French political culture of the Restoration age published in Croce’s review *La Critica* between May 20,

³² *Ibid.*: 248.

³³ CROCE 1931: 298.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 299.

³⁵ OMODEO 1946: 6.

1940 and July 20, 1943 and then collected in 1946 in a volume titled *La cultura francese nell'età della Restaurazione*, constitute a fundamental moment for the fortune of Constant in Italy and contribute in a decisive way to hand down the image of Constant as a great protagonist of the Restoration age in the following decades; a phase, the latter, which according to Omodeo should not be considered at all as a moment of decadence of French history. Just as Croce had placed in the years following the fall of Napoleon the starting point of his History of Europe, in the same way Omodeo identifies in the Restoration the key moment for the definition of the European liberal identity. He bases his analysis on the distinction between the sphere of politics and the sphere of culture: for the Restoration it is possible to speak of decadence only on the political-institutional level, due to the return of Louis XVIII's monarchy, while on the cultural level the progress brought about by the development of liberalism and the diffusion of its principles throughout Europe is evident. It is worth noting that this distinction between the sphere of politics and the sphere of culture is not only configured as an interpretative key to understanding post-Napoleonic French history, but also as an explanatory principle of Omodeo's own intellectual and political path, at least until 1943: during the years of the fascist dictatorship, which he lived "in a condition of isolation",³⁶ the "forced split between politics and culture"³⁷ accompanied Omodeo's historiographic work. Nor should it be surprising that in the aftermath of the fall of Fascism, with the reconciliation of politics and culture, his practical political activity can be seen "as a continuation of his historiographical activity".³⁸

In the political struggles of the Second Restoration, according to Omodeo, Constant is committed to "transforming freedom into something deeper than the happy contingency that had implemented it in France after the Napoleonic ruin", to make it "an essential element of life, to recognise it as a primary value and an immortal good".³⁹ As a theorist of a freedom conceived – on the Crocian model – not only as an "ideal", but also as a "method", Constant devoted himself in the last years of his life to giving this principle "the methodical development that was to lower it from the world of unattainable ideas into historical reality".⁴⁰ This concretisation of

³⁶ GRIFFO 2010: 851-852.

³⁷ MUSTÉ 1990: 379.

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 379.

³⁹ OMODEO 1946: 187. The title of the chapter dedicated to Constant is: *Benjamin Constant e la libertà come ideale e come metodo*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: 189.

freedom takes place, according to Omodeo, in opposition to the Jacobins' conception of freedom as "rebellion"; it is a freedom that on the one hand coincides with the concept of legality and on the other presupposes the existence of a "citizen active in public affairs, absorbed in the cantonal life of his own country and department [...], concerned with transforming and modifying laws with orderly procedure".⁴¹ This ethical-legal freedom therefore finds its concrete content in legality, constitutionalism and active participation.

Constant, according to Omodeo, is an exponent of a new liberalism, different from that of the *doctrinaires*, which is instead "hardened" on positions that are in many ways dogmatic – for example, their idea of the sovereignty of reason as opposed to the sovereignty of the people – and it is characterised by "a technocratic attitude towards the representative system".⁴² Constant, on the other hand, is the thinker able to lead liberalism out of the abstractism of the 18th century; precisely because in freedom he also identifies a method of practical action, he allows its integration with other typically 19th century political currents. In this sense, the example of Cavour, capable of merging "the ideal of freedom with the national problem" is fundamental for Omodeo.⁴³

If the liberalism of the *doctrinaires* can be considered at the origin of the "semi-secular conflict with democracy, which characterises the entire French history of the 19th century", Constant's liberalism, which in any case does not insist "in a special way on popular sovereignty", in Omodeo's interpretation seems to be able to assume 'progressive' characteristics due to its ethical and juridical characterisation: precisely because freedom is conceived not only as an ideal, i.e. as a "universal system, above any criterion of class or religion",⁴⁴ but also as a method, it inevitably leads to direct confrontation with the problems of historical reality: the speculative conception of freedom in the singular then gives way to the problem of freedoms, in the plural, often disposed "to be confused with the social and economic situations on which they rested".⁴⁵ Constant's liberalism therefore has an "expansive" character, because freedom is destined to die "if it does not know how to conquer those who are today strangers to it, and tomorrow must necessarily become its enemies".⁴⁶

⁴¹ *Ibid.*: 194.

⁴² MUSTÉ 1990: 356.

⁴³ OMODEO 1946: 197.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 193.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: 196.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 55.

I would like to emphasise three aspects of this characterisation of Constant's liberalism: the first two are theoretical, the third, of a political-practical nature, calls into question Omodeo's political positioning in the context of the years that followed, those of the struggle for Liberation and the immediate post-war period. Firstly, within his historiographical interpretation of the Restoration, Omodeo assigns Benjamin Constant a very important role, as the final outcome of a genealogy of liberalism "that binds together, by means of an arduous path, the Calvinist development of the Reformation, Kantian subjectivism and liberal religiosity"⁴⁷ of which Constant, precisely, is the main exponent. This is a characterisation of liberalism that, in contrast to the theses of De Ruggiero – though never cited by Omodeo – and in line with those of Croce, "excludes post-Kantian German philosophy, now considered not only extraneous to liberal culture, but even the germ of the subsequent illiberal offensive".⁴⁸ Secondly, Omodeo in sketching Constant's liberalism does not deviate, on a theoretical level, from Croce's conception of freedom: the ethical character of freedom remains prevalent and in fact leads to a devaluation, just as in Croce's thought, of the fundamental core of liberalism as a doctrine of the limits of power. Moreover, it is no coincidence that Omodeo does not devote much attention to the famous *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes* in which this concept is lucidly stated. Contrary to Croce, however, this way of characterising Constant's freedom seems to pave the way, in his reflection, for the interpenetration of liberalism and democracy. Thirdly, this interpretation of Constant's thought already heralds the rupture that will take place between Omodeo and Croce on the political and practical level: in 1944 the former refuses to join the reconstituted *Partito Liberale* and joins the *Partito d'Azione*. This choice is not only politically expedient, but also theoretical: in response to Croce's criticism of the attempt by some anti-fascist intellectuals to combine the concepts of justice and freedom – this is the case with the programme of the *Giustizia e Libertà* movement –, Omodeo distinguishes the "speculative concept of freedom" from "liberating freedom", that is to say the freedom of "those who, for the sake of a greater, more extensive, more straightforward ethical-political freedom, are determined to conduct to the end the emancipation battles of their time, for the 'redemption of the enslaved peoples and classes'".⁴⁹

Beyond this rupture, thanks to Croce and Omodeo the early 19th century French liberal tradition becomes a reservoir of ideas and experiences useful

⁴⁷ MUSTÉ 1990: 353.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 353.

⁴⁹ VALIANI 1984: 117.

to that generation of anti-fascists who at the fall of Fascism would have the task not only of fighting for liberation, but also of rebuilding the new Italy on liberal foundations. A prominent place, as mentioned, is held not only by Constant, but also by Madame de Staël: both are theorists of an original liberalism, born from the redefinition of politics in the light of revolutionary experience. As early as 1938 and again in 1943 Omodeo edits the Italian translation of Staël's most important work, *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française* (1817); according to him, Staël not only inaugurated the prolific historiographic vein on interpretations of the French Revolution, but for the first time proposed a 'dualistic' and liberal reading of it aimed at distinguishing the principles of the 1789 from those of the 1793 (M.me de Staël 1943).⁵⁰

This reading of the Great Revolution is in fact already sketched out during the *Directoire* by Constant himself in the writing *Des réactions politiques*, in which the Terror is defined as a pathological degeneration of the initial impulse of the Revolution, as a phenomenon that arose from another revolution that was distant from the real aspirations of the French and in turn responsible for a reaction. It is an aspect of Constant's thinking that does not escape his greatest Italian specialist from the 1940s onwards, Carlo Cordié – also a collaborator like Omodeo of the Croce's review *La Critica* – who precisely in the months of the Resistance publishes his youthful political writings,⁵¹ emphasising that the Constant's support for the Directory derives from his "desire for legality" and his reading of the revolutionary phenomenon: he "abhors Jacobinism and the Terror, understanding one and the other as a deviation from the progressive spirit of the Revolution".⁵² These are not trivial clarifications, since, as I will show in a moment, some of the 'political' readings of Constant's thought are based on a certain view of his relationship with the Revolution.

3. THE SUCCESS OF *L'ESPRIT DE CONQUÊTE* DURING THE RESISTANCE AND THE CONTROVERSY BETWEEN CROCE AND THE *PARTITO D'AZIONE*

In the aftermath of the fall of Fascism on July 25, 1943 and with the beginning of the struggle for liberation, Constant experiences his period of greatest fortune in Italy, the moment in which for the first time he seems to

⁵⁰ Omodeo's lengthy introduction to this volume also appears in *La Critica* on January 20, 1943 and subsequently in the aforementioned volume on the Restoration. Cf. *Gli inizi della storiografia della Rivoluzione francese: la signora di Staël*, in OMODEO 1946: 197-219.

⁵¹ CONSTANT 1944b.

⁵² Cf. CORDIÉ 1944: xxiv.

become a true political ‘classic’. This happens, paradoxically, not thanks to the work for which he is universally famous, the *Discours* of 1819, but thanks to his 1813 anti-Napoleonic pamphlet *L’esprit de conquête et de l’usurpation dans leur rapports avec la civilisation européenne*, which until then had been almost completely neglected in Italy. In the space of a few months, between the end of 1944 and mid-1945, no less than five new translations are published independently of each other.⁵³ It is not difficult to guess the reasons for this: the strong anti-authoritarianism and anti-bellicism of this pamphlet.

In an article published after the Liberation in the journal *Arethusa*, Carlo Dionisotti states that the work had been circulating in Italian anti-fascist circles since 1943 thanks to a clandestine forgery of the edition that had appeared in Neuchâtel the year before, “when the defeat of the conquerors was already in sight, distant but inevitable”.⁵⁴ The Swiss edition, like four of the five editions that appear in Italy after the fall of the regime, only reproduces the first part of the work. If in fact the second part, dedicated to the *usurpation*, seems to commentators to be more closely linked to the historical-political context of the Restoration in France, *L’esprit de conquête* instead presents a surprising topicality: the merciless analysis of Napoleonic authoritarianism and its peculiar need to feed itself through warfare appears in those months as a perfect diagnosis, conceived more than a century earlier, of nazi and fascist totalitarianism.

In the preface to the edition published by Einaudi in October 1944 – the only one to present both parts of the work to the Italian public – Franco Venturi defines Constant’s pamphlet as “one of the most acute and profound critiques ever written about a dictatorial system”.⁵⁵ In the biographical note Carlo Dionisotti, translator and editor of the volume under the pseudonym of Carlo Botti, also identifies the focal point of the work in the “dissection and critical anatomy of the Napoleonic myth and the political and military process dependent on it”, while emphasising that

⁵³ CONSTANT 1983, 1944a, 1945a, 1945b, 1945c, 1945d. The last two volumes, whose circulation is limited, are the least interesting for the purposes of this essay. Salvatore Annino, editor of the Miuccio edition, goes over Constant’s analysis in his introduction and invites us not to misinterpret the meaning of the work, which is not to be understood simply as a condemnation of war and an invitation to pacifism, but as a critique “against the war of conquest elevated to a system of government, against war for war’s sake” Cf. CONSTANT 1945c: 11. The volume edited by Enrico Lecci for the publisher Denti collects under the misleading title *The Conquerors and Freedom* both *L’esprit de conquête* and *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes*. The introduction limits itself to retracing Constant’s biographical events, without, however, avoiding some erroneous simplifications, and to generically emphasising the topicality of the two proposed texts.

⁵⁴ DIONISOTTI 1945, 1983: 171.

⁵⁵ VENTURI 1944: 11.

the topicality of this analysis “was clearly felt during the other European and world wars”.⁵⁶

Guido Calogero, in the introduction to the Atlantica edition, places the *Esprit de conquête* in the sphere of writings that in terms of importance and “truth” transcend the confines of their era: “when read one hundred and thirty years later” the work acquires “even the flavour of prophecy”.⁵⁷ Constant’s analysis, according to Calogero, is a true “eulogy of the war of conquest as a constructive instrument of civilisation”.⁵⁸ From the characterisation of war as an “ancient” instrument emerges the extreme modernity of the Swiss thinker who, through his historicism, traces an ever valid course of action for the politician, merging “the experience of the past and the foresight of the future, the notion of the real and the flair for the possible”.⁵⁹ Constant’s great insight, which according to Calogero has proved increasingly true over time, is that the war of conquest “no longer pays the bills”: it is no longer a good business and it is no longer a source of man’s moral formation, taking shape “rather as a factor of disorientation and corruption than as a source of virtue”.⁶⁰

In the same months, the legal historian Alessandro Visconti, introducing another edition published in Milan of *Esprit de conquête*, only at first glance distances himself from this excessive actualisation of Constant; if in fact on the one hand he warns the reader against “transporting certain of his views, good in 1814, to our times”,⁶¹ on the other hand he adds, in a sort of final *postilla*, that the Swiss liberal’s work can be read as a “condemnation of Nazism and Fascism, the tragic effects of which he unwittingly foresaw”.⁶² Moreover, Visconti does not fail to scatter the entire introduction with implicit parallels between the Napoleonic empire and Fascism, two historical experiences so distant in time, yet so close in their peculiarities because both can be interpreted as a “twenty-year adventure conceived and carried out by the ‘spirit of conquest’”, or as a “bloody experiment, to organise Europe by conquest”.⁶³

Beyond the antitotalitarian and anti-belligerent value of *L’esprit de conquête et de l’usurpation*, it is worth noting that the different interpretations of Constant proposed in the months of the Resistance or in the days immediately

⁵⁶ DIONISOTTI 1944: 15-16.

⁵⁷ CALOGERO 1945: IX-X.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: X.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*: XVI.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*: XVII.

⁶¹ VISCONTI 1945: 23.

⁶² *Ibid.*: 40.

⁶³ *Ibid.*: 11.

following the Liberation constitute a hitherto completely neglected part of the tight debate on the concepts of freedom and democracy involving Italian anti-fascist intellectuals. Within this group, the future of liberal instances, in the confrontation with the Marxist tradition on the one hand and the Catholic tradition on the other, is played out on the contrast between those who refer to the legacy of Croce and those who embrace the new programme of the *Partito d'Azione*. The latter, in turn, represents a heterogeneous political galaxy that brings together personalities of very different inspiration: from intellectuals who drew on the teachings of Piero Gobetti and Carlo Rosselli, to men who had militated in the *Giustizia e Libertà* movement such as Franco Venturi, to personalities who adhered to the programme of liberal-socialism developed by Aldo Capitini and Guido Calogero. Among the exponents of the *Partito d'Azione*, the need to reflect on the concepts of freedom and equality, liberalism and democracy, in order to reshape their theoretical foundations is very strong; obviously, this need cannot fail to come to terms with Croce's political and philosophical thought. Since 1942, Croce has been collaborating with the *Partito d'Azione* from an anti-fascist point of view, into which some of his most important disciples (just think of Omodeo) have converged; however, after the publication of the party's programme in January 1943, Croce began to criticise its work precisely because of the desire of its exponents to combine the demands of liberalism with those of socialism.⁶⁴ In fact, although for many members of the *Partito d'Azione* freedom is, as for Croce, a "supreme, irreplaceable value to be restored", they consider it complementary to the ideals of equality and social justice, in stark contrast to Croce for whom, as we have seen, freedom belongs "to the moral moment, to be kept quite distinct from the economic moment (to which social justice is relegated)".⁶⁵ It is necessary to take account of this polemic with both theoretical and practical implications in order to understand the interpretations of Constant's thought proposed by Venturi, Dionisotti and Calogero: the first two are identifiable with the *Giustizia e Libertà* current of the *Partito d'Azione*, the third with the liberal-socialist current.

4. CONSTANT AND THE *GIUSTIZIA E LIBERTÀ* CURRENT IN THE *PARTITO D'AZIONE*: VENTURI AND DIONISOTTI

The case of the above-mentioned *Preface* to the Einaudi edition of *L'esprit de conquête* is very interesting: Franco Venturi, who in 1944 is

⁶⁴ On the contrast between Croce and the *Partito d'Azione* see SETTA 1979: 53-65.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: 55.

not only an established Diderot scholar and recognised historian of the Enlightenment, but also, as I said, a former member of *Giustizia e Libertà* militant in the *Partito d'Azione*,⁶⁶ identifies “the living germ” of Constant’s liberalism “in his initial stance on the French revolution”.⁶⁷ However, from the very first lines, one gets the impression that Venturi intends to scale down Constant’s criticism of Jacobinism, which is in fact very clear in both the youthful works of the directorial period and the more mature ones of the Restoration. If on the one hand Venturi recalls Constant’s fleeting infatuation – it lasted about six months – with Jacobinism to which “he had been driven from the heart”, on the other hand he emphasises that after the Terror his political objectives were condensed into a work of “clarification of revolutionary myths, of decantation of Jacobin passions”.⁶⁸ Constant, like Madame de Staël, is presented as a true *idéologue* committed to “fixing in the sphere of ideas the heritage of the 18th century, trying to save its ideal value after the great test of facts” and to carrying out “fruitful work of radical overthrow of the entire 18th century liberation movement”.⁶⁹

Unlike Hegel, who disposed of the Enlightenment legacy, i.e. “all that element of hope and ought-to-be on which the 18th century had been deeply nourished”, Constant instead intends to keep alive these same “principles reborn from the experience of assemblies and terror”.⁷⁰ In Venturi’s analysis, therefore, there is no trace of the ‘dualistic’ and liberal interpretation of the French Revolution. On the contrary, the real revolution for the two liberals of the Circle of Coppet would be the Jacobin one, although they both attempted, in the difficult political conjuncture of Thermidor, to end it *par le raisonnement*, that is to say, to empty it of that charge of sentiments and passions that led to the excesses of the Terror.

It is not by chance that Venturi lingers on Constant’s youthful writings in order to highlight his opposition to reactionary forces: he intends to show the ideal continuity with the Constant of the 1813 work. Having emphasised the European scope of the first part of the *Esprit de conquête et de l’usurpation*, the Italian historian concentrates on the second part on usurpation, which should not only be read in a topical sense; if properly contextualised in the years in which it was conceived, it represents the “attempt to make freedom and restoration coincide for a moment”.⁷¹ As

⁶⁶ On Venturi’s intellectual and political path cf. RICUPERATI 2001: 189-230.

⁶⁷ VENTURI 1944: 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*: 7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*: 9.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*: 10.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*: 11.

the experiences of the Hundred Days and the Second Restoration would later show, however, this was an objective destined to fail, since it was based on the common opposition to imperial totalitarianism by political forces characterised instead by “internal contrasts of ideality, generations and social forces”.⁷² As can be guessed, Venturi has a very precise idea of the French Revolution, made explicit, moreover, in the reference to Jaurès and Mathiez: in this sense, Constant and Madame de Staël, in his opinion, turn a blind eye to the “anarchic”, “monstrous” aspect of the revolution, an aspect that in fact, precisely because of the liberals, will remain in the shadows. The two intellectuals fail to take note of what horrifies one of their contemporaries, Joseph de Maistre, namely “our modern problem of a social revolution at its origins”.⁷³ But, Venturi significantly clarifies, their position does not concern the theoretical level, but is linked to the historical conjuncture and is aimed at avoiding the failure of the entire revolutionary process.

Venturi’s preface is to be read first and foremost from a militant perspective: Constant’s idea of freedom is essentially understood as “a reality to be conquered by picking it out of the rubble” and his liberalism, in the particular historical context of the Resistance in which Venturi actively participates, acquires a clear anti-authoritarian and anti-totalitarian value. But not only that. His analysis must also be framed in the light of a very precise historiographic and political path, whose guiding thread as far back as the 1930s is “an interest in Diderot and the political culture of the Enlightenment as the original nucleus of the socialist tradition”.⁷⁴

In short, Venturi’s reading is part of a theoretical quest that leads him to reformulate, through criticism of Marxism, the foundations of socialism in order to devalue its economic component in favour of the political one. By presenting Constant as an ‘ideologue’, as a direct descendant of the Enlightenment tradition, and toning down his opposition to Jacobinism, Venturi fails to grasp certain peculiarities of Constant’s liberalism such as the centrality of the critique of state authority – whether in the hands of the people or of one man – and his opposition to the experiment of substantive democracy implemented during the Terror; in the final instance, Venturi’s aim seems to be to include both Constant and Madame de Staël in the strand of so-called ‘revolutionary liberalism’ theorised by Gobetti to which he has been looking with hope since the 1930s.

Like Venturi, Carlo Dionisotti, editor of the same edition of *L’esprit de conquête*, is also close to the anti-fascist movement of *Giustizia e Libertà*,

⁷² *Ibid.*: 11.

⁷³ *Ibid.*: 9.

⁷⁴ TORTAROLO 1995: 24.

whose militants join the *Partito d'Azione* from 1942 onwards.⁷⁵ But his reading of Constant's thought in the aforementioned article published in the journal *Arethusa* is somewhat divergent from Venturi's, as he does not intend to establish a continuity between the Thermidorian Constant and that of the Restoration. Certainly, "in the '97 essay on *Political Reactions*, it is already the stringent and penetrating argumentation of the *Spirit of Conquest*"⁷⁶ through which, even before its realisation, the Swiss liberal foreshadows Napoleonic despotism. Indeed, in his pamphlet, Constant well perceives the two "moral counter-revolutions" taking place, due on the one hand to the reaction of the supporters of the Ancien Régime and on the other to a government forced to resort to violence to save revolutionary principles. But despite the violence and the Terror, the directorial writings unhesitatingly emphasise the historical necessity of the Revolution and thus mark "an extreme point in Constant's adherence to and participation in the revolutionary instance".⁷⁷

However, Dionisotti explains, there is another Constant, "the Constant of these modern liberals", different and opposite to the pro-revolutionary Constant of the Directory age: a Constant who, at the waning of the Empire, between monarchy and republic, between reaction and revolution, chose a third way, the English-style constitutional monarchy, to which he remained faithful throughout the period of the Restoration. This was not a purely conjunctural choice, but indicative of a theoretical gap in the development of his thinking during the Napoleonic years: if in fact "in 1797 Constant was in the revolution, in 1819, and already in the essays of 1913 on *Conquest and Usurpation*, he was outside, he was against the revolution".⁷⁸ Precisely that danger of "sucking back into anachronistic pre-revolutionary positions" denounced by Constant in his writings of the Directory period would affect not only French history, but also his own political thinking.

Ultimately, according to Dionisotti there would be two Constants, one revolutionary from the early period, the other reactionary from the Restoration period. Dionisotti's reading, like Venturi's, does not therefore take into account the clear distinction made by Constant between the two Revolutions of 1789 and 1793 and his constant support for the principles promoted by the first one; for both Venturi and Dionisotti, the 'real' French Revolution did not coincide with the overthrow of the old *Ancien Régime*

⁷⁵ From 1944, Dionisotti was editor of the magazine *Italia libera*, which is inspired by the political programme of the *Partito d'Azione*. Cf. VILLA 2001: 15.

⁷⁶ DIONISOTTI 1983: 177.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*: 178.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*: 179.

institutions and the exaltation of the principles of liberty and formal equality, but, in the wake of Carlo Rosselli's historiographical vision, with the attempt at substantial democracy implemented during the Jacobin period.⁷⁹ But if, as we have said, Venturi sees a continuity between the youthful Constant and the more mature Constant and intends to gain the Swiss intellectual in the field of revolutionary liberalism, Dionisotti, opposing them, wants to distance himself from the "great current of orthodox liberalism" that "in Constant's footsteps, but also in a more resolute manner from him", would be reactionary "for the whole century and beyond, right up to the present day".⁸⁰ What exactly Dionisotti means by "orthodox liberalism" is difficult to say; it is evident, however, that in his interpretation there is an implicit criticism of Croce and his conception of a 19th-century liberalism not only inextricably linked to the Enlightenment's demands for freedom, but also anything but reactionary: a further demonstration of the basic irreconcilability between Croce's political philosophy and the ideological inspiration of the militants and intellectuals close to the "unhinged *Partito d'Azione*".⁸¹

5. CONSTANT AND THE LIBERAL-SOCIALIST CURRENT IN THE *PARTITO D'AZIONE*: GUIDO CALOGERO'S INTERPRETATION

The readings of Constant's thought proposed by Venturi and Dionisotti, although arriving at different outcomes, are based on that culture of the Enlightenment of Gobettian derivation that is well present in Turin between the two wars⁸² and represent the political-ideological approach of the members of the *Partito d'Azione* coming from the *Giustizia e Libertà* movement. On the other hand, the reading outlined by Guido Calogero is emblematic of the positioning of those who refer to the tradition of liberal-socialism and who, while taking due account of Croce's lesson, intend to go beyond it 'to the left'. Calogero's reading, moreover, inaugurates an interpretative tradition that identifies in *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes*, – a work that, thanks to the publisher Atlantica, is presented to the Italian public in addition to *L'esprit de conquête* – not so much a praise of civil liberty as a defence and exaltation of political liberty. As we know from recent criticism,⁸³ it is precisely on the different readings of the

⁷⁹ DE FRANCESCO 2006: 125-127.

⁸⁰ DIONISOTTI 1983: 179.

⁸¹ It is an expression used by Croce.

⁸² RICUPERATI 2011.

⁸³ DE LUCA 1997: 165-174 and 295-310.

famous 1819 speech and the relationship between freedom-independence (modern) and freedom-participation (ancient) that the judgement on the democratic or non-democratic nature of Constant's thinking is based. But let us follow Calogero's reasoning, not so much to judge the validity of his reading as to grasp its political-practical intentions in the peculiar context of the Resistance.

Significantly, his analysis has as its polemical target Benedetto Croce, whose reading of the 1819 speech on liberties, as mentioned, captures a priority of the liberty of the moderns over that of the ancients. If on the one hand Calogero accepts, albeit with some reservations, Croce's criticism of Jellinek's legal abstractionism, on the other hand he finds "an inaccuracy" in Croce's assertion that "modern liberty aims at more than the so-called happiness of individuals, it aims at human perfection".⁸⁴ Calogero notes, on the contrary, that Constant sees linked "to the higher ethical requirement of 'perfecting' not freedom-independence, but freedom-participation, "alone capable of subtracting man, by its very exercise, from the hedonistic danger of mere 'civil liberty', i.e. the 'freedom of moderns'".⁸⁵ Of course, as I said earlier, Croce does not miss the fact that in *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes* the reader is warned about the 'privatist' danger of modern freedom. Nevertheless, Calogero continues, he does not realise that this statement is irreconcilable with the previously stated idea of modern freedom as a concept that is "profoundly new and superior in comparison to that of ancient freedom".⁸⁶

To refute Croce's reading, Calogero then explains that this alleged superiority does not exist at all in Constant's speech, nor can it be said that modern liberty is "broader" than ancient liberty. Instead, it is a matter of "two distinct historical experiences of freedom, each of which has its merits and risks, and must benefit the other as much as it benefits itself".⁸⁷ According to Calogero, Constant thinks neither on the philosophical level as Croce does, nor on the juridical level as Jellinek does, but precisely on the historical level. Only by thinking in terms of a historicism that is neither mechanical nor providentialist it is possible to grasp the true discontinuity between the ancient and modern worlds: the transition from a direct conception of democracy to one of a representative type. In the modern state, where everything is more expansive, people prefer to delegate the exercise of power, while at the same time prosperity and the possibility of satisfying one's desires increase.

⁸⁴ CROCE 1931: 294.

⁸⁵ CALOGERO 1945: XXV.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*: XXVI.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*: XXVII.

It is therefore normal that “the freedom most cherished” by moderns is that of taking care of one’s own private affairs and being guaranteed this right. Although the liberal Constant is naturally very sensitive to this type of freedom-independence, however, the fundamental objective of his discourse is to “make people aware of the risk inherent in this abandonment of the old political freedom for the new civil freedom”: he proposes “to compose them in a harmonious synthesis, with the hope that in this synthesis the advantages will be added up and the deficiencies neutralised”.⁸⁸

As can be seen, Calogero establishes a relationship of interdependence between the two liberties. The call to combine freedom-independence with the ‘participatory aspect’ of political life is in line with the philosopher’s desire to put into practice a “project of mass liberal-democracy”.⁸⁹ With some considerations in the last pages of his introduction, Calogero seems to want to go even further to the point of unbalancing the relationship between the two liberties towards that of the ancients. In fact, he affirms that in Constant’s analysis “the mirage of the small town, of the rustic commune, the Attic and Helvetic dream of the polis and of direct democracy” is well present and that if Constant “could go back, we already know what his heart would beat for”.⁹⁰ But in the face of these assertions, one cannot suppress the thought that, in ascribing such inclinations to him, Calogero identifies himself with Constant; the latter then becomes the forerunner of that “third way”, theorised by the Roman philosopher and flowing into the official programme of the *Partito d’Azione*. This third way envisages the possibility of combining political-legal freedoms with economic justice, where the latter is impossible to achieve without effective and complete political participation. On the other hand, the exaltation of the *polis* fits well with a somewhat organicist conception of society, which Calogero imagines, in other writings of the same period, as “a civil coexistence aimed at promoting ethical discipline in view of social unity”.⁹¹

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show how, during the period of the fascist dictatorship and the Resistance, Constant’s different interpretations of liberalism

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*: xxix.

⁸⁹ BRESCHI 2002: 221.

⁹⁰ CALOGERO 1945: xxx.

⁹¹ BEDESCHI 2002: 315. It is no coincidence that, after the dissolution of the Partito d’Azione, Calogero joined the Fronte Democratico Popolare made up of the PCI and PSI in the 1948 elections.

acquired a certain political value on the basis of the different conceptions of freedom held by the different souls of Italian anti-fascism. Although philosophically different from each other, these conceptions of freedom all have one thing in common: they are all quite distant from the 'liberal' idea of freedom, that is to say of a freedom conceived as independence from State power.

Constant's success among Italian anti-fascists is due precisely to the peculiar portrait Croce draws of him in *Storia d'Europa* and in the article *Constant e Jellinek*. It is a Constant far from the image prevalent today, that of the theorist of freedom understood as the theory and practice of the limits of power. Instead, it is first and foremost a romantic Constant, a theorist of a freedom that is not economic, but ethical. This reading certainly has the merit of refuting the image of Constant as a reactionary thinker, as De Ruggiero and, in part, Dionisotti claim. Precisely thanks to and starting from the interpretation theorised by Croce, intellectuals such as Venturi and Calogero arrive in one way or another to make him a champion of progressivism. These authors, however, underestimate some important aspects of Constant's liberalism: first of all, they do not take into account the fact that for Constant, civil liberty has a priority value over political liberty, which is conceived simply as a guarantee of the former. Therefore, it is at most possible to argue that Constant is not hostile to democracy, but only if by democracy one means liberal democracy, that is, the one that in addition to guaranteeing the classical liberal freedoms provides for the participation of citizens through periodic elections in the choice of representatives.

Secondly, the 'democratic' interpretations I have considered fail to take into account the fundamental importance of economic freedom and private property in Constant's thought. It is certainly true that Constant's liberalism does not have an economic inflection, especially since his entire thought is based on a conception of man as the holder of a strong religious sentiment that predisposes him to sacrifice and pursue human perfection; however, private property is one of the rights of freedom that Constant considers most sacred: in describing the freedom of moderns, in fact, he includes, alongside judicial guarantees, freedom of opinion, freedom of movement, freedom of association and religious freedom, also "the right of every man to choose his industry and to exercise it, to dispose of his property and even to abuse it". In short, private property is to all intents and purposes part of what he calls 'modern freedom', i.e. that private sphere into which state authority has no right to enter. To forget this aspect and speak of a 'liberal-revolutionary' Constant or in favour of forms of democracy that also provide for the achievement of social justice – although Constant is far from unaware of the 'terrible' side of property

and market economy⁹² – is to misrepresent his ideas, to no longer place oneself on the plane of the simple interpretation of his thought, but to use it instrumentally to pursue political ends.

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⁹² Despite this, as Stefano De Luca points out in his essay on the relationship between Constant's political thought and political economy (DE LUCA 2021: 73), the author in no way goes so far as "to question the economic system based on competition and call for state intervention for equalization and distributional purposes".

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