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1.

I would like to thank Anthony Tamburri and the Bordighera Press for publishing Colorni’s works in English, and the Calandra Institute for organizing this gathering.

Anthony has said that we need to introduce great Italians to an international public, and Colorni is definitely one of these, although up to now he has received little recognition.

A Colorni-Hirschman International Institute takes its inspiration from Colorni’s thought, and the publication of his works is one of its principal activities. This is something that has developed over time, which has allowed us to achieve a better understanding of his teaching.

We first approached Colorni during our research into the origins of Hirschmanian “possibilism.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Hirschman was Colorni’s brother-in-law, six years his junior, and lived in Trieste in 1937-38, when Colorni was teaching high school and was at the same time involved in the underground antifascist struggle. During that time the dialogue between the brothers-in-law was highly intense and based on themes such as doubt, surprise, and finding exit routes.

Little by little, as we studied Colorni, we delved into his complex intellectual and political-practical output, which—while resting on an essentially philosophical base—cannot be separated into specialized areas but took up different themes as it developed. This way, the more we understood of the pathway he had followed, the better we were able to map out the trajectory of our books. This could be described as follows:

On one hand there are those that we might call adventures in possibilism, in which basic ideas are applied to particular conditions:

* *Critical Thinking in Action* (Vol. 1): containing letters and brief texts that capture the general sense of possibilism
* *The Discovery of the Possible* (Vol. 2): writings from the underground struggle against fascism, in which Colorni invents a new way of being a militant antifascist under the conditions of fascism (which he calls “the struggle against fascism within fascism”), exploiting the conditions offered by the obvious dissatisfaction of the general population
* *The Final Year* (Vol. 4): writings from the Roman resistance during the war, in which Colorni links the development of federalism with the struggle for the country’s liberation, and envisions possible alternative relations between interior and exterior (between the nation and the victorious imperialist powers).

And then there are the books that bring together his elaborations on particular themes:

* *Dialogues* (Vol. 3): these are Colorni and Spinelli’s writings from Ventotene on mainly philosophical themes
* *‘The Philosophical Illness’ and Other Writings* (vol. 5): here Colorni documents his estrangement from the discipline of philosophy, and his interest in the methodology of science
* *Art, Aesthetics, Politics* (vol. 6): writings on aesthetics, inescapable for a young Italian philosopher in the 1930s, accompanied by other texts in which literary criticism becomes a way of expressing thoughts on more general topics.
* *The Leibniz Compromise* (forthcoming): these are texts approaching Leibniz, which constitute the outline of what was to have become a monograph—had it not been for the racial laws, Colorni’s arrest and subsequent confinement.

Limiting myself to commenting on some of the texts from the first group, I would like simply to note some features of his thought that are quite distant both from the ideological dogmatism of his era and from today’s mainstream. Here we get a taste of the climate of severe moral tension described by those who were close to him during the heroic period of the Roman resistance (from Leo Solari to Giuliano Vassalli, Luisa Villani and Claudio Pavone). Because in arguing his positions, and in showing the existence of possible pathways, Colorni helped his interlocutors—whether they were students, young socialists or others—to clarify their own thinking, and give the best of themselves.

2.

*The discovery: doubt and surprise as a starting point, against systems and models.*

Colorni the philosopher detested “any philosophical system that seeks to ‘close the circle’ and explain the universe to you,” as he put it in a letter to Ursula Hirschmann in 1938 (1:57). “Explaining” means giving each thing its place in a system, while the problem for Colorni is “understanding”: “facing things, you might say, in a state of passivity, ready to grasp them in a way that presents itself as most appropriate” (1:57). In this way, following his experimental curiosity, Colorni was able to start from a position of surprise, considering doubt a stimulus for research rather than a limitation of it.

This attitude was the basis of his fight against anthropomorphism, which ascribes to the world “nothing other than an imagined reality created in our image and likeness” (1: 60). For Colorni, “humans have made true progress whenever they notice that they are not the center of the universe.” This they have done by replacing the world of “essences” with that of “relations,” when they have been able to look at themselves from the outside and to understand others. This change in thinking implies a strong link between morality and science (“in this sense, they are the same thing”), since “every scientific discovery (…) is like a slap in the face that says: things are not the way the model would like them to be organized. It is precisely for this reason that every discovery is necessarily incomplete” (1: 60).

3.

*Starting from where you are and developing alternatives, finding loopholes and solutions in difficult conditions.* Evidence of this position is provided by a number of texts on to how to move within the context of fascism.

Here we see the attitude to assume in the “struggle against fascism”—“propaganda not among the fascists, but in the context of fascism,” as expressed in a 1936 article in which Colorni addresses the problem of how to connect with the masses and bring them to an understanding of their class position. For them, “fascism is an established condition to be passively put up with, something they do not always see as a direct oppressor (…) a condition that we cannot help but accept and to which direct opposition would be madness” (2: 77). In this situation, young people must be educated “to see the class struggle as something independent, not involving an immediate collision with the regime” (2: 77). But since fascism “proclaims its concern for the working classes and poses as their defender,” “we must take advantage of this hypocrisy and lead a propaganda campaign against institutions or people (better institutions than people) it is not yet sacrilegious to offend.” And “we will thus set the working masses on a path toward rediscovering the language of class with virgin eyes, as if it had never existed, without immediately incurring accusations of anti-fascism.”

A few months later, reflecting on a series of spontaneous anti-fascist demonstrations, Colorni identified spontaneity as a form of organization (“Spontaneity as a Form of Organization”), going against the traditional opposition between spontaneity and organization. This opposition had guided the top-down approach of the anti-fascist parties, but it had also caused serious damage due to the difficult relationship between people from different backgrounds, who were “having trouble understanding each other, losing their political sensitivity and no longer able, in an environment that is not theirs, to recognize provocateurs and spies” (1:29). In these demonstrations Colorni saw that everyday social connections—in families, between friends, or at work, where people felt safe expressing an opinion against the regime - were combined with dissatisfaction with the rising cost of living, and the push from external events such as the Spanish Civil War (reported on the radio). All this led him to “considerations that we present *as an attempt to adapt to a concrete experience in a specific situation*” (1: 28, italics added). What was needed was to “make use of this system of natural connections, invisible to the police, and give it political fuel” (1: 30)—to find the right balance between spontaneity and organization, cultivating spontaneity and “strengthening it, giving it content,” “giving [people] increasingly precise directives, and increasingly concrete words” (1: 31), above all through the underground press (or the radio). But then, space has to be left so that once the press is “inserted into this network, it moves and spreads by itself” (1: 30). And all this is on the condition that the material “be rich in political content and information,” which is what people need most. “We do not want generic leaflets and simple phrases,” the article concludes, “we want to do a real job of education” (1: 32).

This pedagogical dimension of political action was later developed in a striking paper entitled "The Function of the Teacher in Fascist Schools" (1937). Colorni wrote it as an example of how an antifascist intellectual/professional might behave in a situation where the rhetoric of the regime was taken for granted, while any ideological message (i.e. explicit antifascist propaganda, 1:37) would be neither understood nor permitted.

The paper appeals to the positive outlook, the “needs and attitudes” (1:39) of students, particularly those in secondary schools, for whom education is also a means of social advancement. “They are attentive, intelligent and interested in their studies,” and their “earnestness and sense of responsibility opens them to a curiosity about life that makes their political education easy and productive” (1: 34). Having been educated in a climate of fascism, they know of no other conception of politics, but at the same time they are “eager to find some content in the empty words of propaganda they hear from O.B. [Opera Balilla]” (1: 34). This is an opportunity for the teacher, who has an unquestionable moral influence on them and can win their hearts by appearing “as a modern man, living in his own time and taking an interest in today’s problems” (1: 35).

To students “eager for explanations” (1: 36), things need to be presented in a way that is “objective, historical and scientific” (1: 38), something that “is not only possible, it is the official duty of the schools” (1: 38). Some examples follow of how such teaching can be developed.

The first of these concerns how we talk about the homeland. The teacher who avoids the subject risks being seen in a bad light by the students. But he or she can instead invoke a meaning of homeland that is different from the one the students know. “The word homeland has a value that goes much deeper than the way it is used by the class of exploiters to gain an advantage by confusing people’s ideas” (1: 39). It is values like this that the teacher should refer to—“the sense of belonging to a community that has its own particular characteristics with respect to language, culture, history traditions, and political and social problems, along with the will to resolve these problems within the same community” (1:40). Consequently, “loving your homeland means getting to know its evils, contradictions and internal injustices, and trying to change it” (1:40). This way of presenting things, quite “different from the imperialist idea of believing, obeying and fighting,” is much more coherent with “their need for responsibility and sacrifice,” and will persuade them that “we ourselves are the homeland and that any battle fought to eliminate privilege and exploitation is in reality patriotic”(1: 40).

The other example is teaching history “without apologias.” Here, Colorni’s anti-ideological spirit comes to the fore. It is necessary to avoid both the apologia for fascism and the glorification of great historical figures or epochs, lest we end up accepting, even while “inverting it, the fascist understanding of history as a continuous struggle between the principles of good and evil” (1:41). What we need instead is to “represent the human reality from which we are directly descended and which has passed down to us a set of concrete situations and problems that we cannot escape” (1: 41). In this reality, “economic and social factors are fundamental to political and cultural factors” (1:42). If the teacher is prepared to work in this direction, “the students can be trained in a serious and concrete vision of the current political reality that will keep them from being duped by rhetoric,” and fascism can be discussed as “a current historical phenomenon that can be analyzed in terms of its origins, its causes in the post-war crisis of the middle class, its agrarian and petty bourgeois social makeup, its servitude in becoming the tool of Big Capital, and its reciprocal relations of support with the Monarchy and the Church” (1: 43).

4.

*Trying to influence events, holding on to your core beliefs, not worrying about protective consistency with an “ideological structure”* (4: 96), *and being able to recognize even results achieved in a different way than initially hoped* (4: 99).

This is the theme of the “Letter to Spinelli” of March 1943, in which Colorni specifically addresses the defect, prevalent even among his comrades, of “building the model of the perfect European federation too carefully, forgetting to observe the many outcomes of the drastic moves made by the countless forces of today’s political chessboard” (4: 103).

Colorni was an anti-fascist who was “socialist in his own way” (as Vassalli put it). For him there were some basic positions that needed to be clear, almost by instinct—democracy, civilization, anti-authoritarianism, love. These were not the subjects of ideological disputes conducted at closed party meetings. They were elements to be held steady as events unfolded, especially after July 25, 1943, the Allied landings, the resistance to the Nazi occupation—and they required acting “with the most effective and unbiased methods” (4: 96).

We thus see him moving shrewdly with those state officials who were preparing for the fall of Fascism, exploiting the difficulties of the government and the police, and even forging friendly relations with some of them.

Most importantly, we see this aspect in the way he contributed to the birth of the federalist movement, focusing on a relationship between outside and inside that had never been thought of. There is a turning point in the war when it becomes clear that Nazism will be defeated, but also that new problems will arise among the winning powers—problems that will need to be exploited by the internal movement. Federalism presents itself as an antidote to the nationalisms that produced the war and Colorni sees it as an “achievable goal” (Introduction to the Ventotene Manifesto). For him it was essential that it become part of the resistance struggle, while the other anti-fascist parties saw it as a matter of international politics. But then there is also the problem of the relationship between external winning power and the country.

Unlike what happened after World War I, this time the winning powers (democratic and communist) would not let countries freely choose their own governmental arrangements, but would fight it out between them—using “propaganda, police and espionage, along with economic and political intimidation”—to achieve influence over European countries (4: 97). Colorni anticipated a future division of Europe into two areas of influence, but saw an opportunity in the relationship that would be set up between the hegemonic power and the individual country within each area. The winning power might practice political “housekeeping” by reinforcing the governing classes, and “keeping the countries in their own sphere of influence in a state of economic and military semi-subjugation, covertly sabotaging (…) any attempt to clean house to make way for renewal” (4: 102). Or on the other hand, it could join the vanquished, “constituting with them a true and deeply-rooted unity, absorbing their lifeblood and civilizing forces (…] and facing the other half of Europe as a compact, aggressive bloc, endowed with an immensely strong power of popular attraction” (4: 102). In this Colorni saw the task of the moment: “It is in the power of the peoples of Europe to force the winning powers to come out of their nationalistic shell and to set in motion, even in spite of themselves, a policy of European unification”. (4: 103).

And it did not matter whether the aims of the federalist movement were achieved in a different way from what had been hoped (that is, as the product of an internal mass movement) or that completely unexpected paths had been followed. The important thing was “the openness to recognize these formidable forces, and to embed our activity in their framework.” In other words, “get out of the field of noble ideology and into that of concrete action” (4: 103).

1. Cfr. A, O. Hirschman, *A Bias for Hope*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn. 1971. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)