

## Capitini, Aldo

Capitini (1899-1968), Italian philosopher and pedagogue, was born in Perugia to a working-class family and was admitted to the elite Scuola Normale at Pisa after preparing the Gymnasium final examination as a self-taught pupil. He had a job as the secretary of the Scuola Normale until he was fired in 1933 because of his refusal to adhere to the Fascist Party. Together with Guido Calogero he founded in the Thirties the Liberal-Socialist underground movement. After 1945 he became a lecturer of moral philosophy at Pisa and in 1956 a Professor of Pedagogy at Cagliari and from 1965 at Perugia. Unlike other Liberal-Socialists he did not join the Partito d'Azione, the left-democratic party



founded in 1942 nor, after its dissolution in 1947, the Partito Socialista. He founded the Movimento nonviolento, and the journal *Azione nonviolenta*, and started in 1961 the yearly march for peace from Perugia to Assisi. He died in 1968.

Capitini's main targets were, first, Giovanni Gentile, the Hegelian official thinker of the Fascist regime, secondly, and in a milder way, Benedetto Croce, whose 'religion of freedom' was then the Credo of liberal anti-Fascists, and thirdly, Giuseppe Mazzini, the father of Italian republicanism, because of his 'idolatry' of the nation-state. His sources were first, Kant, secondly, Marx, and besides Antonio Labriola as well as the tradition of ethical socialism, thirdly Gandhi, some of whose writings had been published in Italian in the Thirties, ironically on Gentile's initiative, and in addition to these a number of existentialist, spiritualist, or neo-Kantian thinkers such as the poet Giacomo Leopardi, Carlo Michaelstaedter, Martin Buber, Henry Bergson, and Piero Martinetti,

*Elements of a Religious Experience* (1937) resulted from a collection of lectures delivered by Capitini to clandestine meetings of young anti-Fascists. The book's main idea is a critique of historicism in the name of typical Existentialist ideas such as the finitude and plurality of human beings, best expressed by their mortality.

In *Open Religion* (1955), Capitini makes it clear that he is most unhappy with Croce's solution to the problem of evil. Historicism has nothing to offer to the individual, unless he be satisfied with the idea that evil suffered by himself will be redeemed by others' happiness in the course of future history. This is why Capitini's attitude is "post-humanism instead of humanism" as far as it does not proclaim human action to be self-contained, but admits instead of an "opening" to "something other, something going beyond what is given here and now" (*Ibidem*, p. 185). Post-humanism shares the modern refusal of myths and dogmas by which religion used to promise a consolation for evil, and yet it is not content with the cavalier way in which modern secular thinking tries to look past the experience of evil. His difference from Croce lays in a vindication of a religious attitude, which points at a "liberated condition" where not only *injustice* but also *evil* and *death* be abolished. This is "open religion". Croce's historicism is dogmatic in its denial of religion as far as it pretends to give an answer on something beyond the boundaries of experience.

"Opening", derived from Bergson's idea of 'open' morality and religion, is the key to his attack to historicism. The reason why war and violence are left as unavoidable traits of human existence by

both conservative and revolutionary historicism is that historicism leaves the individual to take care of himself. The original mistake is conceiving of the individual as the “I”, not the “thou” as a starting-point. Starting with the “thou” implies positing brotherhood among individuals as a starting-point, and hope of overcoming the boundary of the individual’s death is a *practical* requirement, not a *theoretical* assertion; it amounts to keeping the “thou”, even after the individual’s death, as still belonging to a virtual community, named “co-presence”, to which all of us belong. The “thou-everybody” instead of the “Whole” cherished by historicists provides the horizon of such “co-presence”; in other words: “there is no Whole [*tutto*], instead there are all of us [*tutti*]” (*Ibidem*, p. 141).

Co-presence is the fundamental assumption of “post-humanism”. In fact, “opening” is “living in a relationship to “the other”, and it is in itself *practical*, as far as “co-presence cannot be the subject-matter of scientific knowledge, on the same footing as the world of matters-of-fact, but can only be experienced through commitments one may take, through the ‘thou-all’ by means of which one addresses it” (*Co-presence of the Living and the Dead*, p. 11). It is also the key-attitude of “open religion”, a practical – as opposed to theoretical – attitude, which, while being different from that of modern historicism, is also different from the one of traditional religions in so far as it focuses on *this* shared secular world instead than in a *separated* world of the holy.

The idea of “addition” is the third key-idea of post-humanism. The practical postulate of co-presence justifies a refusal of *dialectics* as a framework for understanding the world and take *addition* as the alternative to *negation*, the basic category of dialectics. That is, co-presence is something *more than*, or something *added to* nature and life in a biological sense, something similar to Kant’s kingdom of ends. In this vein birth, not death, like [Arendt](#) and unlike [Heidegger](#) is the focus of existence, and each individual’s birth is an “addition” to the reality of co-presence, from which he shall be never excluded, and that is an enrichment for all. This is meant to provide an alternative to historicist immanentism, which substitutes the Whole to individuals, and according to which all individuals “disappear, bequeathing the Whole their own deeds. On the opposite, according to the alternative view, based on the idea of opening to co-presence, all individuals go on existing and co-operating forever” (*Ibidem*, p. 96).

The critique of *Realpolitik* and the vindication of non-violence as a new kind of political realism are the main practical implications of Capitini’s critique of historicism. In *Elements of a Religious Experience* (1937) he started elaborating on the ideas of Gandhi, and puts forth the idea of a “non-violent revolution” as a permanent effort of bringing into reality “omnicracy”, that is, the power of all, understood as the radical alternative to state-authoritarianism and nationalism. Pacifism is another practical implications; the argument in favour is that historicism, both of the right-wing nationalist and of the left-wing revolutionary kind, falls into the logical fallacy of deriving what ought to be from matters of fact, from a mistaken view of freedom that accepts the results of others’ choices as a compulsory starting-point for my action, from the assumption that the final state of affairs is the only criterion for judging the right course of action, while instead the criterion of the right action is in both the goodness of the final state *and* the goodness of those actions out of which the final state results.

Non-violence, in Capitini’s writings from the Fifties and Sixties, is also the basis for a third way between ‘revolution’, understood as military insurgence, and reformism, understood as top-down social engineering without direct action by citizens; he writes that Western Communists have given up the idea of a violent destruction of Western Capitalism and this may be not too bad, but “a struggle for liberation is still required, and one should skip the danger of coming to terms with the existing structures of society [...] In order to liberate civil society from the centralising and militaristic Empire-State, in order not to accept the gifts of Neo-Capitalism that does not change

anything radically, we need to add to already-existing means, other more direct collective, non-violent and down-top means of keeping power under control and granting a public presence to all” (*Open education*, vol. 2, p. 294).

In Italy Capitini has been ignored by the old as well as by the new left. Tiny minority groups have taken notice of his legacy, that is, non-violent, pacifists, conscientious objectors. Among thinkers who realized the importance of his thought are pedagogists Aldo Visalberghi and Lamberto Borghi and philosophers Norberto Bobbio and Giuliano Pontara. The tide changed in the eighties, when the Perugia-Assisi march became fashionable and politicians started showing up there in order to be interviewed by the media. A few monographs on Capitini have been published in Italian but still nothing of his writings has been translated in other languages.

## S. Cre.

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