

ON THE ORIGIN OF USEFUL CONCEPT
IN THE MARXIST THINKING OF THE YOUNG CROCE (1893-1897)

Abstract:

The philosophy of the Spirit, developed by Benedetto Croce during his mature years of thought, has one of its distinctive features in the category of the Useful. For this reason, critics have tried to give answers about the origin of this idea within his youthful thought. Considering the main existing hypotheses (the Machiavelli/Marx parallelism and the 1900-1901 public debate with Pareto), a new one is here proposed moving from the science concept developed since 1893 by a young neo-Kantian Croce and from his studies on Marxist theory and pure economics (1895-1897).

Keywords: Croce, Economics, Marx, Neo-Kantianism, Useful

1. Introduction

The appearance of the category of the Useful in the Spirit's philosophy set up by the mature Benedetto Croce is undoubtedly one of the original topics of his thought¹, as the related wide-ranging debate has demonstrated. The present essay focuses on the Useful's origin in its relationship with the early reading on Economics and value of Utility that will lead in the Crocean neo-Kantian idea of science² and in his first studies around Marxist theory and pure economics matured in the last decade of 1890s³. The work plan follows three key points:

a. the presentation of the existing hypothesis about the origin of the Useful and the autonomy of the Economics in Croce (it will be discussed the two main: I. the derivation from the Crocean parallelism Machiavelli-Marx; II. the one concerning the public debate with Pareto on the economic principle of the two-year period 1900-1901);

b. the discussion about these hypotheses in light of historical-philosophical evidence;

c. the illustration of the thesis here presented that the concept of Useful and the autonomy of economic science are progressively developed by Croce in his early years of philosophical commitment: starting with a neo-Kantian idea of science (developed since 1893)⁴, then by means of Labriola's interest in Engelsian scientific socialism (from 1895),

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¹ Cf. Croce (1902), pp. 58-63 (Engl. trans., pp. 61-67); (1905), p. 49 (Engl. trans., p. 77); (1909), pp. 219-225, 255-277 (Engl. trans., pp. 337-347, 391-424); (1938a), pp. 35-37 (Engl. trans., pp. 48-50).

² Cf. Croce (1893); (1894a); (1894b); (1895a); (1895b); (1895c). See: Bocca (1979), pp. 1343-1364; Bondi (2006); Busino (1983); Cacciatore (1988); (1995); Cingari (2000), p. 110; Cirrone (1983); Craveri (2020); Della Pelle (2022), pp. 10-25; Fehr (1979), pp. 125-160; Ferrari (2016), pp. 78-84; Franchini (1966), pp. 19-32; Guastamacchia (2024); Massimilla (2013); Poggi (1993), pp. 37-74; Tatasciore (1981); Tessitore (1997), pp. 395-404; Tuozzolo (2008), pp. 11-19.

³ Cf. Croce (1895d); (1896b); (1896c); (1897a); (1897b); (1897d); (1899a); (1899b); (1899c); (1900b); (1901). See: Bedeschi (1993); Cacciatore (2000); (2004); Cingari (2000), pp. 123-204; Cutinelli-Rendina (2022); D'Angelo (2023), pp. 135-183; De Rosa (1962); Della Pelle (2020); (2022), pp. 28-59 and pp. 113-161; Faucci (2016); Galasso (1990), pp. 111-139; Gembillo (1984), pp. 59-61; Giordano (2022); (2024), pp. 9-103; Griffio (2004); Maggi (2003); Morani (2015), pp. 640-668; Paolozzi (2020); Rossi (1964); Tuozzolo (2018); (2023); (2024); Visentin (2004a); Zoppi-Garampi (2002).

⁴ Cf. Tuozzolo (2004).

and, finally, with the meeting of pure economics and Pareto (took place between 1896 and 1897).

1.1. The main existing hypothesis on origin of Useful and autonomy of Economics in Croce

In the examination of secondary literature on this issue, there are several analyses that proposed to investigate the Useful topic in the thought of Benedetto Croce⁵. Those lectures agree on tracing the Useful concept as a hallmark of mature Croce's Spirit's philosophy. He, as known, inserts the Useful category along with the more classical Hegelian fundamental forms of the Spirit. Thus, the Beauty is the form of Aesthetic, the Truth of Logic, the Good of Moral, the Useful of Economics.

Considering this, some interpreters have tried to reconstruct the genesis of this category, that of the Useful, moving from the youth studies of Croce. To give just one example, certainly does not appear to be an accident that, in the majestic work dedicated to the philosophy of Croce written by Gennaro Sasso (*Benedetto Croce. La ricerca della dialettica* – 1975) the hinge chapter, the turning point between the young Croce's and the mature Croce's thought, is precisely dedicated to the *Storia dell'utile* (consisting of 286 pages)⁶.

The answers reached in the most specialized analyses to the question: "Where does the category of the Useful in the young Croce originate?", could probably be summarized in two main hypotheses:

a. I. the idea of Useful derives from the Croce's reading of Machiavelli by De Sanctis in its ethical parallelism with Marx⁷. According to critics, evidence of this influence would be found: firstly, in the De Sanctis' *Lezioni* around *La letteratura italiana nel secolo XIX* edited by Croce in 1898⁸, where a Machiavelli reference is present in the Croce's preface to the work (dated April 1896)⁹; secondly and with a wider development, in the Crocean preface to De Sanctis' *Scritti vari inediti o rari* (dated August 1897)¹⁰, where there is a first appearance of the Croce interpretation of the Villari-De Sanctis struggle on Machiavelli's reading¹¹. Those references have convinced part of the interpreters of the existing relationship between the central role of Machiavelli in the Crocean analysis of ethical problem in practical (namely, realistic) terms and the same question in his Marx's understanding. In particular, this kind of reading considers that this clout has driven some aspects of the Croce's Marxist interpretation and locates this influence in the *Memoria* read in the *Accademia Pontaniana* in Naples on 21 November 1897: *Per la interpretazione e la critica di alcuni concetti del Marxismo*¹². In this way, some of those commentators, quoting the version of this Croce's essay contained in the later collection *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica*, underline, first of all, that Croce here defines Marx «il "Machiavelli" del proletariato»¹³. In this sense, they value – moreover – a long footnote present in the V chapter of the essay. Here Croce, after introducing «il [...] detto del Marx»¹⁴: «la morale condanna il già

⁵ Cf. Cacciatore (1993); Faucci (2016); Franchini (1952); Morani (2020); Mossini (1959); Mustè (2018), pp. 87-101; Paci (1952); Pezzino (1983); Reale (1999a); (1999b); Sasso (1975), pp. 425-711; Visentin (2004b); Tuozzolo (2008), pp. 112-139 and 141-146.

⁶ Cf. Sasso (1975), pp. 425-711.

⁷ Cf. Morani (2020); Reale (1999a); Visentin (2004b), pp. 178-184.

⁸ Cf. De Sanctis (1898a).

⁹ Cf. Croce (1896a), pp. XXIX-XXX. In the Crocean quoting to *Storia della letteratura italiana* by De Sanctis (1870), II, p. 464, there are no reference to Machiavelli, cf. Croce (1896a), p. XXIX, n. 2.

¹⁰ Cf. Croce (1897c), pp. XIII-XVI.

¹¹ It is also useful to recall the II volume of *Scritti vari inediti o rari* of De Sanctis (1898b) opens with a conference on *Machiavelli* (vol. II, pp. 3-34).

¹² Croce (1897d); cf. Engl. trans. *Concerning the Interpretation and Criticism of some Concepts of Marxism*, pp. 27-119.

¹³ Croce (1918), p. 118; cf. (1907), p. 134; Engl. trans.: «a Machiavelli of the labour movement», p. 118.

¹⁴ Croce (1918), p. 111; cf. (1907), p. 126; Engl. trans.: «Marx's [...] saying», p. 109.

condannato dalla storia»¹⁵ and discussing the subject of morality in its connection with this perspective of historical materialism, in a following footnote, develops an parallelism between the critics to the Marx's Ethics and the Machiavelli's one (rejecting the Villari interpretation of Machiavelli and defending, on the contrary, the De Sanctis lecture)¹⁶.

In short, this hypothesis affirms that it is permissible to read and to find in Croce, already in 1897, a parallelism between Machiavelli and Marx. This parallelism would be based on the idea that as much Machiavelli, as much Marx, would have developed a further dimension to that of ethics, in which the question is not the morality or the unmorality of the means (in relation to the so famous, as distorted, Machiavellian maxim "il fine giustifica i mezzi"), but the fact that: «Egli va dritto alle conclusioni pratiche»¹⁷;

a. II. the origin of Useful idea is rooted in the public debate with Vilfredo Pareto *Sul principio economico*¹⁸ taking place on the *Giornale degli Economisti* pages between 1900-1901¹⁹. In this discussion, according to the critics, Croce and Pareto would state respectively their positions. The exchange offers a lot of interesting suggestions, such as two certain elements useful for the analysis: primarily, Croce thinks clearly Economics in an autonomous dimension and, secondly, above all, he puts at the center of his analysis – between his vision and that of Pareto on the Economics – the distinction between the quantitative approach and the qualitative one.

In short, Pareto would see Economics in quantitative, mechanical, terms, while from the point of view of Croce Economics is linked to a principle of a qualitative type, autonomous. This problem is undoubtedly central to trace the Useful idea development and its evolution in Croce. However, it should be underlined that in this debate, in a sense, it would be a clash between a new Croce view of Economics (now – in 1900-1901 – matured, compared to the first Marxist interest stimulated by Labriola – in 1895-1897), and a new one of Pareto (that shifts his attention from pure economics to his sociological perspective, independently from his "master" Pantaleoni).

2. The discussion about these hypotheses in light of historical-philosophical evidence

Without denying the importance of these two hypotheses, it is undoubted that a first formation of the concept of economic science and Useful in the thought of Benedetto Croce is to be traced back to his period of early neo-Kantian studies, of youth theoretical Marxist interests and of the first encounter with pure economics and Pareto, before the quoted public debate on the *Giornale degli economisti* (1900-1901).

2.1. The Machiavelli's hypothesis

Compared to the above, regarding the first hypothesis referred to – the Machiavelli one –, it should be noted, first of all, that in the original version of *Per la interpretazione e la critica di alcuni concetti del marxismo* published in 1897, the Crocean sentence that sees Marx as «il "Machiavelli" del proletariato» is not present in this form²⁰ (it appears only ten years later, since the new version presented in the second edition of *Materialismo storico ed*

¹⁵ *Ibidem*; cf. Engl. tr.: «morality condemns what has already been condemned by history», p. 109.

¹⁶ Cf. Croce (1900a), pp. 105-107, n. 2; Croce (1907), pp. 127-128, n.1; (1918), pp. 111-113, n. 2; Engl. trans., pp. 110-111 n. 1.

¹⁷ Croce (1918), p. 112, n. 2; cf. Croce (1907), p. 127, n. 1; Engl. trans.: «He goes straight to practical conclusions», p. 110, n. 1.

¹⁸ Croce (1900b); (1901); cf. Engl. trans. *On the Economic Principle. Two Letters to Professor V. Pareto*, pp. 159-186.

¹⁹ Cf. De Rosa (1962); Faucci (2016).

²⁰ Cf. Croce (1897d), p. 45; also (1900a), p. 157.

economia marxistica published in 1907)²¹. Much more sobriety, Croce in the original 1897 text describes Marx merely as: «il più insigne *continuatore* dell'italiano Niccolò Machiavelli!»²². In addition, it is worth remembering that this reference to Machiavelli/Marx, in all editions, occurs when Croce is reading Marx «come sociologo» and, in comparison with other sociologists, he emphasizes how much «egli c'insegna (anche con le sue proposizioni approssimative nel contenuto e paradossali nella forma), a penetrare in ciò ch'è, nella sua *verità effettuale*, la società»²³. It seems clear, therefore, that Croce here (in the lights of his neo-Kantian idea of science) recognizes in Marx a scientific aptitude for historical investigation, also in the wake of the science analysis proposed in the *Anti-Dühring*²⁴ and of the subsequent development of Engelsian-Labriolian scientific socialism.

As already seen in *Sulla concezione materialistica della storia* (1896)²⁵ and previous essays²⁶, Marx is able, to one side, to use «proposizioni approssimative», but, at the same time, to penetrate «ciò ch'è, nella sua *verità effettuale*, la società»²⁷. However, this capability doesn't seem here to concern the ethical dimension, or the separation of practical moment from ethical one (which Croce also recognizes in Marx, but doesn't seem to attribute here to Machiavelli), but it is about the particular ability of his thought to grasp the effectual truth of society, as it is²⁸. In this sense, the Marx/Machiavelli analogy in the 1897 essay seems to affirm that Marx continued Machiavelli's work in looking at the effectual truth of society.

Moreover, the long footnote in which Croce develops the mentioned parallel between the critique of Machiavelli's ethics and the Marx's one, is not present in the 1897 edition²⁹. It will be added only three years later to the essay version published since the first edition of *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica* in 1900³⁰. For this reason, it is not easy to argue that this topic is the root of the development of the recalled Crocean positions.

As further proof of this evidence, it is possible to note that – once again in the 1900 version of Croce's essay – besides the note on Machiavelli, in the body of the text there are also added these new lines: «Qui non si tratta di sconoscere l'indole della morale, e di voler farne qualcosa di casuale o di relativo; ma semplicemente di stabilire le condizioni del progresso dell'umanità, riportando l'attenzione dagli effetti inevitabili alle cause fondamentali, e ricercando i rimedii nella natura delle cose e non nelle nostre fantasticherie e pii desiderii»³¹. The inclusion in 1900 version of the theme of “progress”³², in these terms and at this point in the text (which occurs at the same time as the Villari-De Sanctis note, that closes the paragraph), is very relevant, insofar as in the 1896 preface to De Sanctis's *Lezioni*, Croce wrote: «Egli [Il De Sanctis] vagheggiava il progresso; ma il progresso cauto, che tien conto delle condizioni reali, delle esperienze, delle varietà dei casi, delle *verità*

²¹ In Croce (1907) *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica* second edition the complete sentence is: «chiamarlo, “il più insigne *continuatore* dell'italiano Niccolò Machiavelli”: un Machiavelli del proletariato», p. 134 (cf. Engl. trans., p. 118). Since the third edition, Croce (1918) writes: «Chiamarlo, a titolo d'onore, il “Machiavelli” del proletariato», p. 118.

²² Croce (1897d), p. 45; cf. also (1900a), p. 157.

²³ Croce (1897d), p. 45; cf. (1900a), p. 157; (1907), p. 134; (1918), p. 118; Engl. tr. «Marx, as a sociologist, [...] he teaches us, although it is with statements approximate in content and paradoxical in form, to penetrate to what society is in its *actual truth*», p. 118.

²⁴ Engels (1878).

²⁵ Cf. Croce (1896b), p. 11; Engl. tr., p. 17.

²⁶ See *infra* p.

²⁷ Concept of “*verità effettuale*” already referred to Croce (1896a), p. XXIX. See *supra* p. n.

²⁸ As, moreover, Croce had demonstrated with that experiment in concrete comparative economic sociology represented by the “elliptical comparison” in the *Anti-Loria*. Cf. Croce (1897a), pp. 15-16 n. 2.

²⁹ Cf. Croce (1897d), p. 40.

³⁰ Cf. Croce (1900a), pp. 105-107 n. 2; Engl. tr., pp. 110-111 n. 1.

³¹ Cf. Croce (1900a), pp. 148.

³² About this “progress” theme in the Machiavelli of De Sanctis' reading by Croce, see Cutinelli-Rendina (2022), pp. 107-108.

effettuali: il progresso preceduto dalle analisi di Niccolò Machiavelli. E motore del progresso è l'uomo stesso, con la sua forza intellettuale, con la sua disciplina morale»³³. Summing up, therefore, the reference to De Sanctis' Machiavelli is later than 1897, both the Villari-De Sanctis' note and the mention added to the text on the "progress" theme are inserted by Croce starting from the 1900 edition. These later additions seem to find their roots, respectively, the first, in the preface to De Sanctis' *Lezioni* of 1896, the other in the preface to De Sanctis' *Scritti vari* of 1897. This therefore seems to mean that the Crocean development of the ethical theme in Marx is autonomous with respect to Machiavellian issues. So that, only later, within the context of Marxist theory, Croce devises the well-known ethical parallelism, that develops from a theoretical point of view the suggestion of Marx as Machiavelli's *continuator*.

At this point, noting that the aforementioned references on ethical parallelism are not present in the 1897 essay – without disavowing the influence that De Sanctis' realism has on Croce's reading³⁴ –, it is certainly possible to look at the epistolary exchange that takes place between Gentile and Croce in the Autumn 1898 about the so-called «*problema Machiavelli*»³⁵ with other eyes. Indeed, in a letter dated 1st October 1898, Gentile complimented Croce for his skill in exposing «i concetti direttivi dell'opera desanctisiana», while expressing his appreciation for Crocean criticism on Villari's Machiavelli interpretation, namely, «per le sante staffilate aggiustate al critico illustre del Machiavelli»³⁶, that Croce carried out in the preface to *Scritti vari inediti o rari*³⁷.

Given that there is no reference to Marx in the Croce's preface to De Sanctis (dated 1897), it should be noted that the first time Marx's name is mentioned in the Villari-De Sanctis controversy is exactly in the Croce's letter of reply to Gentile dated 8 October 1898. Here Croce, referring to this issue set out in the preface, writes: «Quella parte era molto più sviluppata; ma l'ho abbreviata, perché forse mi capiterà di toccar di nuovo, a proposito di Marx, ciò che il Villari chiama il *problema Machiavelli*, e ch'è un problema solo per i filosofi della sua fatta!»³⁸. So, it appears evident that Croce in October 1898 was still thinking about the possibility ("forse mi capiterà") of inserting and developing the already addressed «*problema Machiavelli*» into one of his studies on Marxist theory. Which, as mentioned, he will actually do from 1900 onwards in the new version of *Per la interpretazione e la critica di alcuni concetti del marxismo*.

Thus, it seems permissible to state that before this moment the Machiavellian ethical question, resulting from the Villari-De Sanctis confrontation, remains confined to the literary sphere and doesn't enter into Croce's Marxist questions until 1898.

At this point, it becomes difficult to affirm for sure that the Machiavelli by De Sanctis, in comparison with Marx, is certainly for the young Croce at the basis development of the autonomy of practical moment respect to the moral one (which would be the prelude to the development of the category of Useful in Economics as autonomous in Croce's thought). Indeed, looking closely at the 1897 essay and the previous on Marxist theory, it would seem almost possible that it is the reading of Marx by Croce that stimulates his reflection on Machiavelli parallelism, and not the contrary. Insofar as the young Croce seems to seek, on a literary level, in De Sanctis' Hegelian realism what he had encountered, on a philosophical level, in Labriola's Engelsian historical materialism³⁹.

³³ Croce (1896a), pp. XXIX-XXX.

³⁴ See Tessitore (1997), pp. 207-249.

³⁵ Croce (1981), letter by Benedetto Croce to Giovanni Gentile – 8 October 1898, p. 24. Cf. Gentile (1972), letter by Giovanni Gentile to Benedetto Croce – 1st October 1898, p. 103.

³⁶ Gentile (1972), letter by Giovanni Gentile to Benedetto Croce – 1st October 1898, p. 103.

³⁷ Cf. Croce (1897c), pp. XIII-XVI.

³⁸ Croce (1981), letter by Benedetto Croce to Giovanni Gentile – 8 October 1898, p. 24.

³⁹ As noted by Tuozzolo (2023): «L'elogio di De Sanctis [è] basato sulla convinzione che egli avesse correttamente sviluppato riflessioni sostanzialmente in linea con la concezione marxiano-engelsiana della storia», p. 105. Cf. also Cutinelli-Rendina (2022), pp. 106-107.

In addition, it is useful to note that the Crocean conclusions of 1897 essay are much more tenuous on the point of Marxian morality («sotto il rispetto etico, la *dissipazione della legenda* dell'intrinseca *amoralità* e dell'intrinseca *antieticità* del marxismo»⁴⁰), compared to the more resolved Croce position in the 1918 version, («sotto il rispetto etico la negazione dell'intrinseca amoralità o della intrinseca antieticità del marxismo»⁴¹). Lastly, again on the conclusions, it is even more interesting to highlight that already in the original 1897 version of the essay by Croce (the one without the footnote), he already divides explicitly his closing remarks, at point 4 «sotto il rispetto etico»⁴² and, in the previous point, at the 3: «sotto il rispetto pratico»⁴³. Arguing, in this last autonomous field, «l'impossibilità di dedurre il programma sociale marxistico (ma anche ogni altro programma sociale) da proposizioni di pura scienza»⁴⁴. In the light of what has been reconstructed so far, it seems at this point quite clear that the autonomy of the practical moment from the ethical one is derived by Croce from the early study of Marx and not directly from the Machiavelli parallelism, when he expressly distinguishes the «rispetto etico» from «rispetto pratico», separating the latter from pure science⁴⁵.

2.2. The Pareto's (1900-1901) hypothesis

The last concept mentioned, that of science, pure science, is the link with the second hypothesis advanced by the specialist criticism, namely, the view of science that is at the origin of the idea of Economics and Useful in young Benedetto Croce.

First of all, it should be pointed out that the Croce-Pareto debate did not begin in public on the *Giornale degli economisti* during the two-year period 1900-1901, but privately four years before in 1896-1897 (as shown by some letters, which also the specialized critics have sometimes ignored or rejected as secondary)⁴⁶. However, the dispute over the economic principle, on the one hand, is the final stage of this age-old debate, on the other hand, reached most readers because of its inclusion in the well-known *Materialismo Storico ed Economia Marxistica*, from its second edition of 1907⁴⁷.

But the main question – from a historical-philosophical point of view – is that Croce and Pareto that are discussing around the economic principle on the *Giornale degli economisti* have new interests since their positions at the beginning of their debate in 1896-1897. It is worth just recalling that their first philosophical encounter concerned – first of all – the Marxian theme of historical materialism and its relationship of proximity/distance from science. And it is not by chance that, on the one hand, Croce, after the debate with Pareto, leaves the path of Marxism and sets on other grounds (going towards Hegelianism), on the other hand, Pareto, after the debate with Croce, leaves the path of the pure rational economy and starts with greater determination towards sociology⁴⁸.

⁴⁰ Croce (1897d), p. 45; cf. also (1900a), p. 156; (1907), p. 133; Engl. trans.: «In regard to ethics, the *abandonment of the legend* of the intrinsic *immorality* or of the intrinsic *anti-ethical* character of Marxism», p. 117.

⁴¹ Croce (1918), p. 117.

⁴² Croce (1897d), p. 45.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 44.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ It is useful to remember also that the preface to *Scritti vari inediti o rari* is dated by Croce August 1897, but the De Sanctis' volume will be published in 1898.

⁴⁶ Cf. Pareto (1960), I, letter by Vilfredo Pareto to Maffeo Pantaleoni – 19 December 1896, p. 498, letter by Vilfredo Pareto to Benedetto Croce – 24 December 1896, p. 317; (1973), letter by Vilfredo Pareto to Benedetto Croce – 27 May 1897, pp. 340-343, (1973); see also de Caprariis (1972); Michelini (1998). About this exchange Della Pelle (2016).

⁴⁷ As well-known, this work – by the very will of a Croce no longer interested in Marxism – will collect most of his youth writings of Marxist-Engelsian inspiration, as well as the 1900-1901 exchange with Pareto. This second edition of 1907 is the text used for the quoted English translation by C.M. Meredith and introduced by A.D. Lindsay. Cf. Croce (1907), pp. 259-283; Engl. trans., pp. 159-186.

⁴⁸ As extensively reconstructed in Della Pelle (2022).

3. *The illustration of a new thesis*

To better understand the thesis here proposed, it is useful quickly to remind certain central passages of some studies by Croce before 1898, preceding the Croce's letter to Gentile and prior or contemporaneous to the first encounter with Pareto. In this regard, it is necessary to reconstruct the two main aspects of the Crocean perspective to understand correctly the root of his concept of Useful and his vision of Economics: primarily, what is the idea of science which Croce develops in his youthful phase of thought and the related theoretical Engelsian-Marxian view on historical materialism; subsequently, the first appearance of the idea of Useful.

About the science's idea it should be understood where the Crocean perspective originates from and, above all, it is necessary to verify what kind of distinction he makes between sciences. In order to do this, it seems useful, as a first step, to retrace the development of this concept in his early related studies from 1893 to 1896.

1893. Since this year the young Benedetto Croce (following clearly the Herbart's *Lehrbuch zur Einleitung in die Philosophie* - 1813⁴⁹) begins to recognize in the search for the «generale» (or in the search for a method of validation of knowledge that re-knows the real, through a logical-normative structuring) the specificity of "science" compared to other forms of knowledge. In the reading held on 5 March 1893 at the *Accademia Pontaniana* of Naples concerning *La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte*⁵⁰, in an anti-Hegelian perspective, Croce, examining *Il concetto della scienza e la storia*, notes: «Dove non c'è formazione di concetti, non c'è scienza. La filosofia stessa, somma tra le scienze, – se pur le scienze hanno tra loro una gerarchia – non è, secondo la bella definizione herbartiana, se non l'elaborazione dei concetti che le scienze particolari lasciano confusi e tra loro contraddittorii»⁵¹. Here Croce makes a first distinction – which is not, however, a classification – between the «scienze particolari» and the «scienza somma» among them, which is philosophy. That is, between the field of the sciences, where concepts are formed and remain «confusi e contraddittorii», and that in which these concepts are elaborated.

1895. Croce in *L'arte, la storia e la classificazione generale dello scibile*⁵² returns to these issues and (still following Herbart) distinguishes between «scienza pura» and «conoscenza descrittiva»⁵³. Here the Crocean differentiation between pure science and history is further and explicitly clarified by the distinction among sciences. Croce, indeed, makes direct reference to the positions of Dilthey in the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*⁵⁴ of 1883 and proposes the distinction between «scienze proprie» and «scienze improprie»: while the first ones are «scienze di concetti», which go beyond «le cose particolari», «miran[d]o a un concetto» and do not perform a «lavoro descrittivo», «ma schiettamente scientifico, che oltrepassa il fatto concreto e individuale, sussumendolo in concetti via via più comprensivi», the latter are «scienze descrittive», that is to say «scienze storiche o di fatti» which focus on a «fatto» and are anchored to the particular⁵⁵.

Without this neo-Kantian premise (namely, the Crocean distinction between «scienze di concetti o scienze proprie» and «scienze descrittive o scienze improprie») it would be perhaps impossible to understand rightly the subsequent thematic interest and the reading that Croce performs of historical materialism on the tracks of the setting by

⁴⁹ Herbart (1813).

⁵⁰ Croce (1893).

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 11.

⁵² Croce (1895c).

⁵³ By this way, he establishes the distinction between science, on the one hand, and art and history, on the other. Pure science (that of concepts), unlike the second (the descriptive one), notes already Croce in 1893: would maintain an «interesse costante», «che si riferisce allo spirito in quanto intelletto, che cerca di padroneggiare la realtà nella sua totalità; ma, dipendendo dal complesso svolgimento umano, una parte di esso varia secondo i tempi, i luoghi ed altre condizioni» (Croce, 1893, p. 24).

⁵⁴ Dilthey (1883).

⁵⁵ Croce (1895c), pp. 64-65.

Antonio Labriola⁵⁶. Indeed, also in other related 1895 essays, Croce – always having in mind the recalled neo-Kantian distinction between sciences, – begins to consider the reading of Marx and Engels' historical materialism something not reducible to «a comoda formula»⁵⁷.

1896. *Sulla concezione materialistica della storia*⁵⁸ can be considered the first of the Crocean writings completely inserted in the scientific socialism and, hence, in the field of Marxist theory. The realistic point of view from which Croce observes Marx's historical materialism is derived from Labriola's reading, which criticizes monistic (non-scientific) Marxism. So much so that Croce seems to propose a "labriolian" distinction between a scientific socialism («letteratura socialista»⁵⁹ Marxian-Engelsian) and a non-scientific socialism, which – despite this – «ha avuto grande fortuna»⁶⁰ and that doesn't belong to this horizon.

In the Croce's interpretation, when «Engels» «insieme col Marx» conceived historical materialism «non aveva inteso formulare una teoria rigorosa»⁶¹, «Bella cosa (egli esclamava) se si potesse dar la formula per intendere tutti i fatti storici!!»⁶². So, Croce, with Engels and Labriola, distances himself from the prospect of understanding historical materialism as a rigorous theory, against «la pretesa di riduzione della storia al fattore economico»⁶³. In this regard, Croce argues that although historical materialism doesn't consist «soltanto nel perfezionamento degli schemi e delle categorie astratte del pensiero»⁶⁴. It must be borne in mind that with the latter «hanno [...] valore le osservazioni approssimative, la conoscenza di quel che di solito accade, tutto ciò che si chiama l'esperienza della vita, e che si può esprimere in formole generali ma non assolute»⁶⁵. So «la scuola del materialismo storico»⁶⁶ with its «osservazioni approssimative»⁶⁷, which imply «sempre un *press'a poco* e un *all'incirca*»⁶⁸, reached «feconde scoperte, per intender la vita e la storia»⁶⁹. Thereby the experience of life – the dependence of all parts of life upon each other and the reference to their «genesi» «dal sottosuolo economico»⁷⁰ – as well as «la formazione dello stato e del diritto»⁷¹ derive from that «sottostrato della storia [che] sono i rapporti della produzione ossia le condizioni economiche»⁷². In other words, historical materialism, in the Engelsian form presented by Labriola and developed by Croce, has abandoned any claim to establish the law of history, to rediscover the concept to which the complex historical facts are reduced.

⁵⁶ See also Agrimi (2005); Burgio (2016); Cacciatore (2000); (2004); Centi (1984); Giuliano (1996); (2000); Poggi (1978); Visentin (2004a).

⁵⁷ Croce (1895d), p. 184. Cf. (1895a), pp. 128-129.

⁵⁸ Croce (1896b); cf. Engl. trans. *Concerning the Scientific Form of Historical Materialism*, pp. 1-26.

⁵⁹ Ivi, (*Appendice*) p. 20.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ Croce (1896b), p. 9; cf. Engl. trans.: «He had not meant to state an exact theory», p. 15.

⁶² *Ibidem*; cf. Engl. trans.: «It would be a fine thing, he exclaims, if a formula could be given for the interpretation of all the facts of history!», p. 15.

⁶³ *Ibidem*; cf. Engl. trans.: «The supposed reduction of history to the economic factor is a ridiculous notion», p. 15.

⁶⁴ Croce (1896b), p. 10; cf. Engl. trans.: «Solely in the perfecting of the forms and abstract categories of thought», p. 17.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*; cf. Engl. trans.: «Have approximate observations no value in addition to theories? The knowledge of what has usually happened, everything in short that is called experience of life, and which can be expressed in general but not in strictly accurate terms?», p. 17.

⁶⁶ Croce (1896b), p. 11; cf. Engl. trans.: «The school of historical materialism», p. 17.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*; cf. Engl. trans.: «Approximate observations», p. 17.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*; cf. Engl. trans.: «Always an almost and an about», p. 17.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*; cf. Engl. trans.: «Discoveries [...] which are fruitful in the interpretation of life and of history», p. 17.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*; cf. Engl. trans.: «Origin in the economic subsoil», p. 17.

⁷¹ Croce (1896b), p. 10; cf. Engl. trans.: «The constitution of rank and law», p. 14.

⁷² *Ibidem*; cf. Engl. trans.: «The foundations of history [that] are the methods of productions, i.e., economic conditions», p. 14.

About the appearance of Useful idea and the autonomy of Economics, it is helpful to recall that starting with the quoted *Sulla concezione materialistica della storia* and the Italian version of the so-called *Anti-Loria*⁷³ (1897, but already in circulation since the end of 1896), Croce goes into the discussion about the theory of value, both from the point of view of Marx's labour-value and that of pure economics' utility-value.

1896-1897. Croce's full entry into Marxist theory entails a direct confrontation with Economics. Indeed, the references to some economists begin to appear in the studies of Croce starting from the so-called *Anti-Loria*⁷⁴. Croce's work, stimulated by Labriola, takes up the Engelsian critique to Loria having as reference the book *Dal terzo volume del Capitale di Carlo Marx. Prefazione e commenti di Federico Engels*⁷⁵, edited by Martignetti and published in 1896. But Labriola's good auspices for Croce's work will soon be betrayed, when he finds out that, in the Italian edition of the *Anti-Loria*, Croce begins to refer to pure economics and hedonism, recognizing, therefore, the scientific nature (as well as the existence) of pure economics⁷⁶. This is done for the first time «in quella nota che guasta un po' l'effetto»⁷⁷, criticized by Labriola, where Croce formulates the so-called theory of "elliptical comparison"⁷⁸.

From here on, namely, from the Italian version of the essay, Croce begins to be interested in Economics of Böhm Bawerk and Austrian School⁷⁹, further carrying out his neo-Kantian concept of science and starting to develop his idea of value of Utility.

About the interest of Croce to the theme and to the studies of pure economics and marginalism, here it is just sufficient to recall that in December 1896 (with the newly text published): on one side, Pareto is among the first to receive the *Anti-Loria*⁸⁰ and, above all, to give feedback to Croce⁸¹; on the other, the famous note on "elliptical comparison" sets up the clash between Pantaleoni and Labriola on the scientific nature of their respective positions: pure economics and historical materialism⁸².

As shown by the letters between Croce, Labriola, Pantaleoni and Pareto⁸³ and by the following writings of Croce (i.e. the quoted *Per l'interpretazione*⁸⁴) the debate on value theory appears as a discussion about the knowledge-validity of labour-value perspective (Ricardian-Marxian) and that of the theory of utility-value (hedonistic), always in the light of the Crocean idea of science.

At this point, it is quite clear that Croce wants to prove two things: firstly, both the autonomy of pure economics as a science through utility-value theory, and the knowledge validity of the «vedute»⁸⁵ by Marx and Engels' Ricardian approach to labour-value; secondly, the existence of utility-value in capitalistic society, read differently from the two approaches⁸⁶.

⁷³ Cf. Croce (1897a).

⁷⁴ Croce (1896c); (1897a).

⁷⁵ Engels (1896). This text contains the Italian translation of the Engel's *Vorwort* to *Das Kapital* Volume III (Marx 1894, pp. III-XXV) and of the *Fr. Engels' letzte Arbeit. Ergänzung und Nachtrag zum dritten Buch des Kapital* (Engels 1895).

⁷⁶ Cf. Croce (1897a), pp. 15-16, n. 2.

⁷⁷ Letter by Antonio Labriola to Benedetto Croce – 25 December 1896, in Labriola (1983), p. 757.

⁷⁸ Cf. Agazzi (1962); Badaloni (1974), pp. 7-40; Bellanca (1997), pp. 65-95; Burgio (2005), pp. 150-157; Della Pelle (2020a); Musté (2009), pp. 32-33; Petrucciani (2016); Reale(1999a); Tuozzolo (2008), pp. 146-169; (2016b); (2018).

⁷⁹ Cf. Croce (1897a), p. 16, n. 2.

⁸⁰ Cf. Letter by Vilfredo Pareto to Maffeo Pantaleoni – 19 December 1896, in Pareto (1960), p. 498.

⁸¹ Cf. Letter by Vilfredo Pareto to Benedetto Croce – 24 December 1896, in Pareto (1973), p. 317.

⁸² Cf. Letter by Antonio Labriola to Benedetto Croce – 25 December 1896, in Labriola (1983), p. 757.

⁸³ Cf. de Caprariis (1972); Labriola (1983), p. 757, p. 763, p. 787, p. 806; Micheli (1998); Pareto (1960), p. 498; (1962), pp. 31-34, p. 38; (1973), pp. 317-318.

⁸⁴ Cf. Croce (1897b).

⁸⁵ Croce (1896b), p. 8; in the Engl. trans.: «Views», p. 13.

⁸⁶ So, Loria would have misunderstood the real dimension, «il fatto», with that of «concetto, l'ideale» (Croce 1897a, p. 12). And thus, leaving the context of a «discussione scientifica» (*ibidem*), he had assumed that Marx's analysis of value theory was intended to formulate a general law of society and not to provide a critical reading

About autonomy of Economics, defending both labour-value perspective and theory of utility-value⁸⁷, Croce in the note on “elliptical comparison” writes: «La teoria svolta da Ricardo perfezionata dal Marx non è una teoria generale del valore, ossia non è propriamente una teoria del valore. Questa teoria generale è invece l’assunto della scuola edonistica»⁸⁸. Also in the light of what has been seen in previous essays, it is clear that here Croce thinks about the epistemological setting, on the one hand, of the «scuola edonistica», or of the «economia pura», as an approach that seeks a law of value, that is «una teoria generale del valore», «una teoria assoluta»⁸⁹; from the other side, of the «teoria svolta da Ricardo perfezionata dal Marx», that is, of the labour-value theory, as an approach which doesn’t seek a universal law of value, because «[esso] non è propriamente una teoria del valore»⁹⁰, but «una concezione» without «elementi costitutivi di una teoria»⁹¹. This means, for the young Croce, that while «economia pura»⁹² is a science of its own, Marxist view is something else⁹³.

About the value of utility, it is precisely in the note on the “elliptic comparison”, where there is the quotation of Böhm-Bawerk, that appears for the first time in the Crocean writings the word «profitto»⁹⁴, in economic terms. The “elliptical comparison” shows, against Loria, on the one hand, the validity of the Marxian approach, on the other hand, the existence of surplus value, profit, in capitalist society. The surplus value is not something fantastic, but a typical historical fact of that kind of society.

On the concept of surplus value, Croce already in his 1896 essay *Sulla concezione materialistica della storia* wrote: «Lo stesso concetto del sopravvalore non è forse un concetto morale, per quanto, a mettere a nudo il fatto nella sua semplicità originaria, fossero necessari a Carlo Marx tutti i sussidii tecnici dell’economia scientifica? In pura economia, si può parlare di sopravvalore?»⁹⁵. If, therefore, as Croce writes, for the monist Loria the Marxian surplus-value would be nothing more than a «valore-noumeno»⁹⁶, and, similarly, for the Austrian economist Böhm-Bawerk it would be a «fantasticheria»⁹⁷, this element discovered by the Marxian analysis would be something true and real, having – as already written in 1896 – Marx used «tutti i sussidii tecnici dell’economia scientifica»⁹⁸. Surely this aspect, here in the essay on historical materialism, is made less evident by the attribution to the surplus-value of the connotation of «concetto morale»⁹⁹. However, in one way, it should be noted that when Croce returns to the text in *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica* in 1900, he will modify the words «concetto morale» (clarifying it) by speaking of «un interesse morale, o sociale» «che ci muove a costruire un concetto del

of the type of capitalist society. Taking up his idea of science, instead, Croce argues that in the perspective of historical materialism «il Marx e l’Engels non hanno mai ridotto questa concezione ad una teoria assoluta, e non potevano ridurla, non essendovi nella materia gli elementi costitutivi di una teoria» (ivi, p., 10). This dimension would have been ignored by Loria, who applied the idea of the «astratto *homo oeconomicus*» of the «studiosi di economia pura» to Marxist theory (ivi, p. 11).

⁸⁷ Following, in a way, the perspective opened up by Ricca-Salerno (1893). Cf. Croce (1897d), p. 20, n. 2.

⁸⁸ Croce (1897a), p. 15, n. 2.

⁸⁹ Ivi, p. 10.

⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 15, n. 2.

⁹¹ Ivi, p. 10.

⁹² Ivi, p. 15, n. 2.

⁹³ Furthermore, this is exactly in line with the 1895 essay on *L’arte, la storia e la classificazione generale dello scibile*, so much that in the *Anti-Loria* Croce makes clear that «la concezione [...] classica ed obbiettiva della scuola ricardiano-marxista, che riduce il valore al lavoro» is not less than «quella utilitaria, propugnata dalla scuola che si suol chiamare austriaca». Both are the results of a «spirito egualmente rigoroso», Croce (1897a), p. 15.

⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 15, n. 2.

⁹⁵ Croce (1896b), p. 17; cf. Engl. trans.: «Is not the interest which prompts the formation of a concept of *surplus-value* a moral interest, or social if it is preferred? Can surplus value be spoken of in pure economics?», p. 25.

⁹⁶ Croce (1897a), p. 16; cf. Loria (1895), p. 478.

⁹⁷ Croce (1897a), p. 16, n. 2; cf. Böhm-Bawerk (1896), pp. 203-205.

⁹⁸ Croce (1896b), p. 17.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*. See the wide-range analysis on young Croce’s «morale» concept in Tuozzolo (2024), pp. 124-175.

*sopravalore*¹⁰⁰; from another, at the root of Marx's concept of surplus-value – also in the reading that gives it Croce – there is the theme of inequality (between those who own the means of production and those who do not) typical of capitalist society, which is a matter of «morale» interest as well as «sociale», which generates a historical and economic «fatto»: the surplus-value.

The question about the possibility by the «economia pura» to speak of «sopravalore» is clarified by the analysis completed in the *Anti-Loria*. In particular, once again in the famous note on “elliptical comparison”, Croce writes: «In pura economia, il valore di un bene è eguale alla somma degli sforzi (pene, sacrificii, astenzioni, etc.) che son necessari per la sua riproduzione; e salarii e profitto del capitale sono entrambi economicamente necessari posta la società capitalistica»¹⁰¹. In this sense, the scientific approach of pure economics, adopting the «concezione utilitaria»¹⁰², «edonistica», assumes a theory of value that is «generale»¹⁰³. Unlike the Marxian one, it does not consider the value = labour (here the «salarii»), generated by the workers, as necessary for the reproduction of commodities, but the value is determined also by the «profitto», because the equation that it conceives, sees the value = «sforzi (pene, sacrificii, astenzioni, etc.)». In this way, not so far from the pure economics approach by Pantaleoni¹⁰⁴, the concept of «lavoro» is extended to any type of effort included in the production process and, therefore, generative of value, not only to the workers' labour-force, but also to the efforts of capitalists.

Therefore, it appears quite evident how the young Croce distinguishes between, on one hand, a theoretical approach of «scienza pura», that (precisely) of «economia pura» with the utility-value theory; on the other hand, «una concezione» of «scienza impura», that of the Ricardian-Marxian perspective with the labour-value view. However, the central aspect underlying all the distinction of Croce is obvious: both approaches see the surplus-value, the value of utility (the profit), but, while pure economics justifies plus-value by making a «somma di sforzi (pene, sacrificii, astenzioni, etc.)», namely a quantitative fact, Marxian conception recognizes the surplus-value as a moral, qualitative value.

This duality in the reading of surplus value, that is, of the value of Useful, almost seems to indicate what will be the future distinction between *Scienza dell'economia* and *Filosofia dell'economia*, that will characterize Croce's mature perspective. But beyond this suggestion, what is evident at this point is how in 1896-1897, following the elaboration of a neo-Kantian epistemological perspective and the encounter of both Engelsian-Labriolian Marxist theory and pure economics, Croce develops an idea of Useful that appears to be the first in his thought and that he will expand in the future, with the conviction of the autonomy of the Economics.

4. An open thesis

This initial reconstruction of the origin of the Useful in the young Croce's thought is a starting point that clearly needs to be developed further, in relation to Croce's later and mature writings. However, it seems quite clear from this analysis that, on the one hand, the Neo-Kantian science idea, and, on the other, the Marx and pure economics studies about value theory, led Croce to develop both the Economics' autonomy idea and the Useful concept that will characterize his mature thought. This, at the same time, doesn't mean that the hypothesis that considers as relevant the Machiavelli-Marx parallelism and the debate on *Il Giornale degli Economisti* (1900-1901) aren't valid from a knowledge point of view, but from a historical-philosophical perspective they represent stages of a much broader path of which this thesis has attempted to make a brief contribution that it is necessary to continue to develop.

¹⁰⁰ Croce (1900a), p. 34.

¹⁰¹ Croce (1897a), p. 15, n. 2.

¹⁰² Ivi, p. 15.

¹⁰³ Ivi, p. 15, n. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Pantaleoni (1899), pp. 125-126.

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