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GUGLIELMO FERRERO AND THE WRITING OF HISTORY

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A BASIC problem in historiography is to determine the factors that condition an historian's approach to his craft. His writings will usually show the extent to which he is a child of his time and will provide, to some degree, an index to his psychology. In some historians, such as Guglielmo Ferrero (1871-1942), the influence of the distinctively personal emotional stresses is more easily discernible than in others. Hence this paper is particularly concerned with the relationship between the events of his personal life and his writings at any given period.

Ferrero did not follow the prescribed path of a would-be professor of history. Product of a middle-class liberal milieu, he attended several universities, but never took a degree. As a student, he did not subject himself to any training in historical methodology; he was, in fact, more interested in law, literature, and sociology than in history. In 1893 he collaborated with his future father-in-law Cesare Lombroso, the celebrated criminologist, in a study on criminal anthropology,¹ and in the same year he also published a book on the psychological laws of symbolism.² A trip to Britain and Germany which he made at this time offers an example of his immediate and intense reaction to personal experience. In *Europa giovane* (1897), a volume of reflections and generalizations, he glorified these countries and contrasted their energy and spirit with what he considered to be the senility and decadence of the Latin countries. His socialism and pacifism were reflected in a series of lectures on disarmament, published as *Militarismo* (Milan, 1897). As a result he was invited to join the editorial staff of Milan's radical, republican paper, the *Secolo*, but, disillusioned with its futile campaign against the existing political system, he retired from journalism and devoted himself to the study of history.

The discussion aroused by his *Europa giovane* had raised doubts in his mind about the wisdom of using industrial success as the best means of judging the greatness of a people. Since Roman history showed a perfect example of a state that had been great and became decadent, he turned to it for more precise criteria of "whether a people is ascending or descending":³ the result was a five-volume study, *Grandezza e decadenza di Roma*,⁴ which appeared between 1902-1908. His appraisal of the two centuries of Roman history beginning in 78 B.C. convinced Ferrero that the ancient world judged as symbols

¹ C. Lombroso and G. Ferrero, *La donna delinquente*, (Milan, 1893).

² G. Ferrero, *Les lois psychologiques du symbolisme*, (Paris, 1895).

³ G. Ferrero, *La vecchia Europa e la nuova*, (Milan, 1908), 15.

⁴ English Translation: *The Greatness and Decline of Rome*, (5 vols., New York, 1907-1909). Vols. I-II, tr. A. E. Zimmern, Vol. III, A. E. Zimmern and H. J. Chaytor; Vols. IV-V, H. J. Chaytor. These volumes were also translated into French, German, Spanish, Hungarian, and Russian.

of decadence many features which modern industry was imposing on the world as indications of progress. If, as the ancients contended, the growth of wealth and of luxury were signs of corruption, then the modern world was decadent, and its most decadent nations were England and Germany, the ones which he had admired as the most progressive. Since he was anxious to find laws of society that would be applicable to all ages, Ferrero now asked himself who had then the more valid criteria of judgment, the ancients or the moderns?

His sociological orientation, of which Benedetto Croce⁵ was especially critical, is evident throughout Ferrero's work. For example, in *Grandezza e decadenza di Roma*, he slighted the role of the individual in history and emphasized that played by the economic development of society. Indeed, he carried this economic determinism to the point where he regarded the political and social life of Rome as almost completely dependent on its economic life. Great men, he stated, are unaware of the historic forces of which they are the toys. A Caesar is only "the blind instrument of destiny", a "titanic destroyer"⁶ whose career was but a product and symbol of conflict between powerful economic forces, between a rising mercantile age and an old world society; the key to Roman History is to be found in the general political expansion, the production of psychological pressures by social, political and economic conditions which resulted in the development of personal ambitions. In this manner Ferrero conceived the important place of psychology in history, a fact not surprising in view of his interest and training in psychology and criminology. He even went so far as to suggest that the destruction of Carthage had been responsible for a fundamental change in the Italian people from patient, dogged, and hardy to "nervous, excitable and unbalanced".⁷ Ferrero himself admitted elsewhere that he had sought to reduce Roman History to a "psychological phenomenon which everyone, who merely looks about himself, can observe."⁸

This sociological and psychological orientation was more than the natural result of his personal interest and studies. It reflected also a conflict which dominated the Italian intellectual world of the period, a conflict between the positivism that had held sway since the latter half of the Nineteenth Century and the neo-Hegelian idealism, whose leading spokesmen, Croce and Gentile, had founded *Critica* in 1902, as a vehicle for their views. As a participant in this controversy Ferrero asserted his faith in that aspect of positivistic historiography that emphasizes not the compilation of facts but the history of groups and societies, the recurring pattern and uniformities, the general laws governing the course of historical events. While there are no references to Karl Lamprecht in his works, Ferrero would likely have agreed with his *dictum* that "History is primarily a socio-psychological science."⁹

⁵ In a book review in *Critica*, IX, (Rome, 1911), 151.

⁶ G. Ferrero, *Greatness and Decline of Rome*, II, 309.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 144.

⁸ G. Ferrero, "Storia e Filosofia della storia," *Nuova antologia*, XXXIII-XXXIV, (Rome, 1910), 87.

⁹ Karl Lamprecht, tr. by G. A. Andrews, *What is History? Five Lectures on the Modern Science of History*, (New York and London, 1905), 3.

Ferrero's desire to make "the present intelligible by studying the past"¹⁰ and to interpret the past in terms of the present led him to make extensive use of current political terminology and of historical parallels. His pages were filled with such current political concepts as "urban proletariat,"¹¹ "conservative party,"¹² "middle classes,"¹³ "reactionaries,"¹⁴ and "democratic party."¹⁵ He compared Crassus to "many of the Jewish bankers"¹⁶ of the Nineteenth Century, Cataline to William Jennings Bryan,¹⁷ Clodius to a Tammany Hall organizer¹⁸ and Caesar to a "Tammany Boss of New York."¹⁹ Although these devices found no favour among members of the academic profession, his clear, vivid and colourful language, made history popular and entertaining for non-academic readers.

The appearance of the first two volumes of *Grandezza e decadenza di Roma* brought Ferrero international renown. In 1906 he was invited to lecture at the *Collège de France* and was awarded the cross of the Legion of Honour. He visited Argentina under the sponsorship of a prominent Buenos Aires newspaper and went to Brazil at the request of the Brazilian Academy. In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt invited him to the United States where he also delivered the Lowell Lectures²⁰ and taught at Columbia University and at the University of Chicago.

The visit to Germany and England had led to the young Ferrero's intellectual awakening, those to the Americas resulted in "an intellectual crisis which decided definitively the direction of my thought."²¹ This event is best reflected in *Ancient Rome and Modern America* (New York, 1914), and in *Europe's Fateful Hour* (New York, 1918), a series of essays in which history is used as a means of understanding contemporary problems. Although he was beginning to question the validity of his criteria of "progress", he continued to apply it to what he saw around him, and concluded that here was the fullest flowering of that questionable "progress". He was seeing a struggle between the ancient desire for quality and the modern desire for quantity which, he felt, had begun with the idea of progress in the Eighteenth Century, and which had come to the fore with the French Revolution. No longer an optimistic liberal, he had come to believe that since 1789 Europe had unfortunately abandoned the philosophic doctrines which sustain the principle of authority and which form the solid basis of religion, tradition, and the family. At

¹⁰ G. Ferrero, "Storia e filosofia della storia," *Nuova antologia*, XXXIII-XXXIV, (1910), 93.

¹¹ G. Ferrero, *Greatness and Decline of Rome*, I, 39.

¹² *Ibid.*, 94.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 289.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 300.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 313.

²⁰ G. Ferrero, tr. Frances L. Ferrero, *Characters and Events of Roman History from Caesar to Nero*, (New York, 1909).

²¹ G. Ferrero, *La vecchia Europa e la nuova*, 18.

the same time, he questioned the ability of science "to give men all those benefits which the worshippers of progress are promising."²²

The outbreak of the First World War only confirmed Ferrero's worst suspicions about this quantitative point of view, and about Germany where it was most extreme. The European holocaust was caused, above all, by "that unshakable optimism, that blind faith in the progress and strength of men Western civilization was on the way to thinking itself omnipotent."²³

Actually his attacks on Germany, and on the influence of German intellectual currents on Italian thought, preceded the outbreak of the war during which he was an ardent interventionist against the Central Powers. Before 1914 he had decried the "invasion of protestant culture in Italy"²⁴ and the post-1870 influence of the "mystical" protestant mind on the Latin spirit. Some of his bitterness towards "Germanized" Italian intellectuals was due, no doubt, to the successful opposition of the faculty of the University of Rome in 1910 to his appointment to the chair of philosophy of history. They argued that he sought to turn history into sociology, while he accused them of accepting "the warmed-up left-overs of the German philosophic kitchen"²⁵ and insisted that Comte, not Hegel, had best understood "the problems of history, its methods, its role and its limits."²⁶

The post-war years found Ferrero evaluating the new crisis in Europe. Up to this point he had devoted his attention primarily to the one aspect of his dual intention, that of interpreting the past in terms of the present. Now he concentrated more upon the effort to make the present intelligible by studying the past. Hence he turned to Roman history once more and re-examined the political crisis of the Third Century A.D. "to find out what light its history can throw upon the conditions of today."²⁷ He saw the danger of anarchy resulting, both then and now, from the lack of any avowed principle of authority. At the same time he was proclaiming his faith in the League of Nations. But as early as 1920, he became disillusioned with the peace-makers and prophesied that, "the recent war is but the prelude to a later and more gigantic conflict of arms."²⁸

Against Fascism in Italy Ferrero waged a relentless war. He attributed its growth to the fear of communism among the bourgeoisie, to the post-war disillusionment, and to the spiritual debris of the dying Nineteenth Century, "Nietzscheism, imperialism, amorality, idealism, and anti-Christianism."²⁹ In impassioned rhetoric he bemoaned the fact that for a century Europe had left "the narrow prison

²² *Ibid.*, 19.

²³ G. Ferrero, *Europe's Fateful Hour*, vi.

²⁴ G. Ferrero, "Storia e filosofia della storia," 95.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ G. Ferrero, tr. the Hon. Lady Whitehead, *The Ruin of Ancient Civilization and the Triumph of Christianity — with some Considerations in the Europe of Today*, (New York, 1921), 175.

²⁸ G. Ferrero, "Italy's Role in the Peace Drama," *Living Age*, CCCVII, (1920), 451.

²⁹ G. Ferrero, tr. E. W. Dickes, *Four Years of Fascism* (London, 1924), 121.

of humble truths and common sense,"³⁰ and he advocated a return to a form of "asceticism."³¹ His life in Fascist Italy was not a happy one. When refused a passport, he took refuge in writing historical novels.³² Eventually in 1930 he was allowed to leave and he finally settled in Switzerland, where he received his first academic appointment as Professor of Modern History at the University of Geneva. There, in 1931, he published *The Unity of the World*. Charles A. Beard went so far as to prophesy that this would become "one of the universal classics to be read with Plato and Aristotle by the long generations to come."³³

During the last three years of his life, Ferrero published an "historical and philosophic trilogy"³⁴ which will thoroughly examine the problem of the origin, development, and nature of the revolutionary state.³⁵ Once again his purpose was to derive lessons from the past, in this instance from the period 1789-1815, that might guide the present, more specifically the peacemakers of the post-war period. Ferrero's thesis was that fear is "the original sin of life",³⁶ the primordial evil, "the soul of the living universe."³⁷ Man is "born full of fear, and he lives a prey to terror."³⁸ The fall of the Bastille, in 1789, was "the most serious, the most mysterious, the most extraordinary phenomenon in history."³⁹ Henceforth, an increasing fear, which was convulsed into terror and transmitted to the Directory and to Bonaparte, lay behind all events. Brumaire was "a product of fear",⁴⁰ and it was "fear and only fear"⁴¹ and not a craving for power, the illusion of grandeur or headlong ambition that led Napoleon to renew the war in 1803.⁴² "The fundamental secret of his [Napoleon's] whole policy, like that of the Revolution, was fear."⁴³

The significance of fear was first manifested to Ferrero by one of his encounters with Fascism. A personal warning from Mussolini had ended with the ominous words "that the French Revolution treated its enemies in quite a different fashion."⁴⁴ The cause of this threat had been a private letter of his which had been used as the basis of an anti-Fascist article in a New York newspaper. The interest

³⁰ G. Ferrero, tr. B. R. Redman, *Words to the Deaf, an Historian Contemplates his Age*, (New York, 1926), p. 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³² G. Ferrero, *Le due Verita*, (Milan, 1926); *La rivolta del figlio* (Milan, 1927); *Sudore e Sangue*, (Milan, 1930).

³³ G. Ferrero, tr. H. Coxe, *The Unity of the World*, (London, 1931), p. 12.

³⁴ G. Ferrero, tr. B. Pritchard and L. Freeman, *The Gamble — Napoleon in Italy*; (London, 1939) tr. T. Jaeckel, *The Reconstruction of Europe—Talleyrand and the Congress of Vienna 1814-1815*, (New York, 1941); tr. T. Jaeckel, *Principles of Power — The Great Political Crisis in History*, (New York, 1942).

³⁵ G. Ferrero, *The Reconstruction of Europe*, ix.

³⁶ G. Ferrero, *The Gamble*, p. 97.

³⁷ G. Ferrero, *Principles of Power*, p. 30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴⁰ G. Ferrero, *The Reconstruction of Europe*, p. 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴² G. Ferrero, *The Gamble*, p. 97.

⁴³ G. Ferrero, *The Reconstruction of Europe*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ G. Ferrero, *Principles of Power*, p. 6.

shown by the head of a presumably stable government in an article published in a foreign country astonished Ferrero. Later he read how Napoleon had stifled the freedom of the press. "And the more I compared what I had seen in Italy after 1922 with the pale and lifeless account of the historians I was reading the better I understood And one day at last the light dawned upon me. Supposing the analogy were not an accident but a revelation?"⁴⁵ On the basis of this "revelation", Ferrero outlined his theory of fear, showing how power acquired through a *coup d'état* had the "diabolical property" of frightening the one who assumed it before it frightened others.⁴⁶

Ferrero felt that the world of 1940 was witnessing "the repetition of Napoleon's adventure on a world-wide scale — Napoleon's adventure translated into German"⁴⁷ — hence he sought in these studies some redeeming individual and some meaningful action which could serve as guides to the post-war peacemakers. He found the former in the person of Talleyrand, the one man "who did not become a prey to the general panic"⁴⁸ of the revolutionary period, who broke the spell of fear and saved "France, Europe and the whole of mankind".⁴⁹ The latter he found in Talleyrand's persuasion of Alexander I, on March 31, 1814, to accept the restoration of the Bourbons and thereby acknowledge the principle of legitimacy in the reconstruction of Europe.⁵⁰ Ferrero arrived at this interpretation in 1918, when he found himself at a loss to provide a remedy for the *malaise* of the Twentieth Century. Then, "one day while reading Talleyrand's *Memoirs*, I came across seven pages in the second volume (pp. 155-162) that revealed to me the existence of the principles of legitimacy. The revelation was momentous. From then on I began to see clear[ly] in the history of mankind and in my own destiny."⁵¹ This statement demonstrates his basic approach to the writing of history in the later period. He relied on sudden flashes of illuminations, revelations, or on circumstantial personal accident.

In these volumes Ferrero was also undertaking a work of revision. He minimized Napoleon's role in the Italian campaign of 1796-97, arguing that he had merely carried out the detailed instructions of the Directory.⁵² This view led to a lively debate with Louis Madelin in the *Echo de Paris* in the winter of 1937 in which Ferrero was worsted. Ferrero, as Peter Geyl points out, has been the only historian of any importance to deny Napoleon's military genius⁵³ and to defend Talleyrand.⁵⁴

In *Principles of Power*, his last book, he defined government as legitimate "if the power is conferred and exercised according to prin-

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ G. Ferrero, *The Reconstruction of Europe*, p. ix.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵¹ G. Ferrero, *Principles of Power*, p. 19.

⁵² G. Ferrero, *The Gamble*, p. 186.

⁵³ P. Geyl, tr. O. Renier, *Napoleon for and Against*, (London, 1949), p. 55n.

⁵⁴ P. Geyl, "The French Historians and Talleyrand," in *From Ranke to Toynbee, Smith College Studies in History*, XXXIX, (1952), 55-64.

principles and rules accepted without discussion by those who must obey." ⁵⁵ In the history of western culture he saw only four principles of legitimacy, the elective, the hereditary, the aristo-monarchic, and the democratic. ⁵⁶ He argued that only these justifications of power could give government without fear. Ferrero was obviously quite undisturbed by the contradictions that could be found in his discussion of legitimacy. He conceded that the principles of legitimacy were "fragile", "human", "limited", "empirical", and "unstable", and he even admitted: "any philosophical hack can demonstrate their absurdity". ⁵⁷ In places the reader is often left wandering amidst the author's maze of rhetorical language, repetitions, elaborations, and self analysis. Perhaps all this is understandable if one accepts the extraordinary claim that, "principles of legitimacy are not to be found in philosophy, in religion, in history, in law, or in any of the intellectual culture of the West," but only in seven pages of Talleyrand's *Memoirs* and in a few *pensées* from Pascal which constitute "the entire literature on legitimacy in the West." ⁵⁸ Uninhibited by intellectual modesty, Ferrero contended that his *Principles of Power* "for the first time" ⁵⁹ posed the problem of the legitimacy of government. He also boasted that, although only a professor, he had "one advantage over the mighty ones of the earth . . . they have been accomplishing and are accomplishing the destruction of the world without knowing what they were and are about, whereas I do understand." ⁶⁰ Now he also understood what had baffled him in the Italy of his youth when, in 1894, a pamphlet against Crispi had brought him two months in prison. He realized that the shortcomings of the Giolittian system were caused not by unscrupulous and incompetent politicians but by the evils of "quasi-legitimacy". The House of Savoy was not legitimate outside of Piedmont-Sardinia. Ferrero saw himself as the "first who has understood and reconstructed" that political crisis, "and I am the first to conjure it up, after fifty years, in the hope that it may serve as an atonement." ⁶¹

In *Principles of Power* he attributed the intellectual chaos of the twentieth century to "progressive secularization of thought and of life" ⁶² and to the abandonment of traditional philosophy. He did not believe, however, that religion could be the guide for society because the present crisis "is beyond the strength of all other spiritual and temporal power of the universe." ⁶³ Since it was of a political nature, only the principle of democratic legitimacy — the delegation of power by the people — could be a solution to the chaos that had beset the world from 1815, and more particularly since 1918 when the monarchic principle was destroyed.

⁵⁵ G. Ferrero, *Principles of Power*, p. 135.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 251-52

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 296-97.

The concept of the role of history as it emerges from a study of Ferrero's books is eminently practical. In 1910 he spoke of the philosophy of history as being nothing but "an innovation in the method of teaching history."⁶⁴ His aim was to study the component parts of important historical phenomena such as wars, revolutions, dynasties, and republics so as "to bring them close to the causes, to the facts, to persons, to passions and to ideas already known through preceding experience and knowledge."⁶⁵ If to this is added his own description of another of his works as a "treatise of philosophy or sociology",⁶⁶ it seems evident that he considered the philosophy of history to mean the sociology of history, and history, sociology and philosophy to be interchangeable terms. To him history represented past sociology. He was seeking the hidden key, the one incident to solve the riddle that baffled him. After his discovery of the principle of legitimacy, Ferrero became obsessed with the urgent necessity of convincing the world of its efficacy. In 1939, he described himself as "condemned by sombre destiny to continue my struggle alone against the fear neurosis of the present age."⁶⁷ Yet while he was normally obsessed by contemporary political considerations, he seemed completely blind to the presence of Communism in the modern world. For example, he regarded the Russian Revolution as merely "a consequence of the decay of monarchic legitimacy."⁶⁸

As an historian, he exaggerated and oversimplified too readily and was too anxious to make use of the comparative method. For comparisons to be of value a writer must test his analogies so as to determine to what extent the factors involved are similar. Ferrero fails to carry out this testing process, and his readers are soon aware of it. Similarly his parallels, even though they remain interesting, are unreliable and dangerous. His generalizations were seldom limited or qualified. The "never" and the "always" dot his works. "Napoleon," he wrote, "never aspired after either a world empire or the hegemony of Europe."⁶⁹ With the facility of the journalist, he seemed indifferent towards the customary accoutrements of the scholar. Although he appears to have based his studies almost exclusively on primary documents, the reader sometimes doubts whether he was familiar with the latest research on the subjects with which he was dealing.

For these reasons Ferrerian historiography evoked little favorable response from academic historians. This coolness may be partially attributed to their jealousy of his popularity and/or to the academic prejudice that when laymen praise a book it is time for the scholar to protest. Whatever the cause they reciprocated the distrust and contempt in which he had held them ever since their unfavorable reception of his volumes on Julius Caesar. A sad but hopeful man, he remained, to the end, faithful to the "sudden illumination" of 1918 which had

⁶⁴ G. Ferrero, "Storia e filosofia della storia," *op. cit.*, 92.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶⁶ G. Ferrero, *Between the Old World and the New*, vi.

⁶⁷ G. Ferrero, *The Gamble*, xii.

⁶⁸ G. Ferrero, *Principles of Power*, p. 304.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

revealed to him "the key to the history of the nineteenth century." ⁷⁰ Up to his death in 1942, he clung to the idea that after the war all would quickly return to order, if only the principle of democratic legitimacy were to be adopted. ⁷¹

To the student of history Ferrero's books are important, not as a source of accurate and authoritative factual references, or a profound philosophy of history, but for their challenging reinterpretations of men and events. He was highly subjective and impressionable: to him the events of the past became alive, "in the light of my personal experiences, even when the historian had only half understood them or had not understood them at all." ⁷² Seldom objective, often arrogant, contemptuous of academic historians, he still possesses an interest for us because of his distinct flair for the controversial and his suggestive and provocative insights.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁷¹ Gina Lombroso Ferrero, *Il Mondo*, V, (October, 1942), 19.

⁷² G. Ferrero, *Principles of Power*, p. 12.