



Benedetto Bravo (1931), University of Warsaw

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Born in a village now integrated into Bassano di Grappa, a city in the province of Vicenza, in Veneto, son of two elementary school teachers. He was educated first at the village school, then in Bassano. From his childhood in Mussolini's Italy, he remembers compulsory, quasi-military physical training on the so-called fascist Saturdays, at the end of which all students would chant: *Per il Re: Viva il Re! E per il Duce: A noi!* After high school, Bravo enrolled at the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa; on graduation, he was offered a one-year bursary to study at the University of Oxford during the academic year 1953/1954. When his School, in consultation with the British Council, wanted to offer him a yearly extension of the bursary, he refused because the offer was not adequately consulted with the Student Council in Pisa. Professor Hugh Last, Principal of Brasenose College where Bravo was staying, bid him goodbye, saying: "Here, students do not arrogate such rights." In Italy, at that time, working at the university or even at high school was not easy to come by. After tutoring private students for a while, Bravo was granted a nine-month bursary by the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici in Naples, created in 1946 by Benedetto Croce. Next to Thucydides, his main subject there, Bravo attended lectures; of particular interest was the history of the nineteenth-century French historical thought (Tocqueville), taught by Federico Chabod (1901–1960), an outstanding scholar from Aosta specializing in modern political history and political thought. In 1955, Bravo obtained a bursary

at the University of Hamburg – through the services of the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) – attracted by the scholarly and didactic fame of Bruno Snell. In Hamburg, participating in many discussions, he realized that the West-German society dealt successfully with the Nazi past. Snell was one of the rare German scholars who were, from the beginning, consequently against Hitler. He was aware that German professors from the 1930s–1940s had little understanding of politics, and this blind spot allowed Hitler to confuse them easily. Snell undertook as his postwar mission to open German academia to the world and actively promoted this approach. Among other projects, he created the Europa-Kolleg, barely a decade after World War II. When Bravo visited him many years later in Hamburg, he fully approved of Willy Brandt and said about him that “He is clean.”

Questioned how Italian professors dealt with the fascist past, Bravo said that already in 1943, Mussolini’s popularity had gone down, and the ideology as such was “rotted” from the inside. This trend continued, especially when Italian imperial power proved to be an illusion. The postwar de-fascization was rather superficial and mild, but according to Bravo, there was no real need for firmer action. What remained of fascism led to bloody civil unrest under German occupation up to the Spring of 1945, but later the threat did not present any danger. The fascist dictatorship never went as deep as in Germany. For example, Benedetto Croce, generally known as an enemy of fascism, could publish and function within his circle in relative safety. Croce’s intellectual authority was such that the Mussolini regime did not dare to question it.

In 1956, Bravo, who, like his former fellow students from Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa still did not find a university position, started teaching Italian at Parisian high schools. At the same time, he attended lectures that interested him at local universities. He became part of a circle of intellectuals “de gauche,” who put him in touch with the two famous French anthropologists of ancient Greece, Jean-Pierre Vernant (1914–2007) and Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1930–2006), and with an eminent Hellenist and sociologist, already at the close of his career, Louis Gernet (1882–1962).

Vernant, a convinced pacifist, became a leader of the French Resistance *Libération-sud* (“colonel Berthier” at Forces françaises de l’intérieur de Haute-Garonne). He was a member of the Young Communists during his university studies and remained in the Communist Party after the War. However, he was strongly opposed to the war in Algeria and finally quit the Party in 1969 – for the same reasons he joined it in the first place, as he told Bravo.

Another scholar who made a deep impression on Bravo was Ignace Meyerson (1888–1983), the founder of historical psychology, born in Warsaw and as a seventeen-year-old forced to flee Poland under the threat of arrest by police because of a speech delivered to workers in front of the electrical plant in Powiśle (Warsaw). Bravo had difficulties imagining this quiet, softly-spoken man involved in something as loud and tense as a speech to an angry crowd.

The last fascinating French personality Bravo encountered during his stay in Paris (and later) was Louis Robert, a Greek epigraphist at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, who had an unusual custom of inviting foreign students for dinner at his home. On one of these occasions, in 1969, Bravo met Ewa, a young assistant on a yearly stipend from the University of Warsaw, whose attractive personality he liked very much, especially because she seemed so decisive. She attended seminars on papyrology and epigraphy. Several years later, she became Bravo's wife.

When still in Paris, Bravo became intrigued by the subject of Hellenistic intellectuals and their culture, how it emerged and acquired specific qualities. He was strongly influenced by the reasoning of Antonio Gramsci, who expressed many inspiring thoughts on the position and function of various kinds of intellectuals. He was still looking for his research path. Vernant's teaching and publications, which he highly admired, seemed refreshing but he did not feel called to follow in Vernant's footsteps. Vidal-Naquet's later publications had a similar impact on Bravo. In 1960, he returned to Italy and worked as a high school teacher. This episode, unpleasant as it was, lasted only a few months. Ewa was back in Warsaw, and they both agreed that he could try for a bursary in Poland.

At the time, there was a Polish-Italian academic exchange agreement in force. Italian candidates were few, and Bravo quickly obtained a bursary for a year, which was then extended for several more months. During that time, he learned enough Polish to function. When Ewa's mentor, Professor Iza Biežuńska-Małowist (1917–1995), realized that Bravo intended to settle permanently in Poland, she started looking for a position for him at the university, and indeed, he was hired as a Latin and later Greek instructor. When his Polish improved, he was asked to conduct ancient history workshops. He did this successfully until he was promoted to teach the history of ancient historiography. Struggling with presenting the subject easily and excitingly, he remained unhappy with his performance as a teacher. Several years later, in 1966, he defended his PhD on the German ancient historian Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884).

Questioned about his impressions of Warsaw upon his arrival in the early 1960s, he said that the city seemed colorless and cold, but that did

not matter, as he was interested in Poland when he was still in Paris. As a dissident Communist inclined to revolt and entirely unorthodox, he was fascinated by the events of the Polish October '56. He was aware of changes aiming at the liberalization of the regime. When Bravo arrived in Warsaw, this liberalization was in retreat, causing resentment and regrets in the academic community. However, while this unwelcome change could have impacted the study of the most recent history, there were no such pressures in the Department of Ancient History. Bravo fully expected to be able to discuss Marxist revisionism, but, to his great disappointment, it proved impossible. In the community, where at the time, intellectual discussions were open and free, Marxism was a dead subject. The hope for a "socialism with a human face" to spring from the basis of Marxist convictions by then almost entirely vanished, but he was not inclined to abandon his hope and the views that he shared with his Italian and French friends. He was changing his mind slowly but irrevocably, step by step. His revisionist Marxism also ebbed away. The last, definitive stroke was delivered by the shameful events which occurred in Poland in March 1968.

Bravo felt at ease working in the group of ancient historians led by Professor Biežuńska-Małowist. She managed her team capably and with skill. From her and her team – and especially from his wife – Bravo learned discipline in didactics. But his research interests remained all over the place. Initially, he continued working on Hellenistic intellectuals but with no concrete effects on the horizon. Professor Biežuńska advised him to write his PhD dissertation on the nineteenth-century studies of Antiquity, a topic he read about when still in Hamburg.

Biežuńska's suggestion proved salutary. Bravo worked on Droysen and demonstrated that his Hegelian views illuminated his historical research and that this Hegel's enthusiast, a student of the classicist August Boeckh (1785–1867), discovered something that his views did not foresee. In 1964, Bravo defended his PhD dissertation, which, after some modifications, became his first publication in 1968. He underlined the influence Bronisław Baczko (1924–2016) and the seminar he conducted at the Stanisław Staszic Palace in Warsaw had on his thinking about the history of historiography and ideas. Another scholar he encountered at that time was Krzysztof Pomian (1934), whose books *The Past as a Matter of Faith* and *The Past as a Matter of Knowledge*,¹ made a significant impact on Bravo. He also read extensively Leszek

1 The second book was ready for print in 1968 but the March events followed by Pomian's loss of employment interrupted the editorial process. Subsequently,

Kořakowski (1927–2009), his book *Presence of Myth* was left in typescript with Irena Krońska (19915–1974) when Kořakowski, who lost the right to teach in 1968, had to leave the country. The book was published four years later, in 1972, in France by the Polish Instytut Literacki.

Bravo obtained the degree of habilitation on the basis of a 1980 monograph on συλάν, or extrajudicial private seizure against foreigners in Greek cities. Like the fate of many key breakthroughs in scholarship, it came about accidentally. Having read in *Vestnik Drevnej Historii*, published in 1972, the oldest known Greek letter (ca. 500 BC) written on a lead tablet excavated on a small island near Olbia on the northern Black Sea coast, Bravo became fascinated by these archaeological finds and produced his own, different interpretation of the text. As his knowledge of Greeks on the Black Sea was rudimentary, he thought guidance from one of the students of Professor Kazimierz Majewski (1903–1981), the Polish specialist on Olbia,² Professor Aleksandra Dunin-Wąsowicz (1932–2015). He started also following the work of Russian and Ukrainian archaeologists, as well as orientalists, on other lead tablets found on the northern shore of the Black Sea, offering several new interpretations. The result of this fascination was the habilitation monograph on συλάν, as well as the later book on Herodotus' description of Scythia and another on Greeks living on the coast of the Black Sea, entitled *Pontica varia*.

As Professor *emeritus*, Benedetto Bravo continues to conduct a seminar with a small number of participants based on readings and interpretations of ancient Greek literary texts.

Pomian emigrated to France. The book was finally published in Warsaw in 1992. Bravo read it still in typescript.

- 2 The archaeological site in Olbia has been studied by Polish classical archaeologists from the Institute of the History of Material Culture, later renamed The Institute of archaeology and Ethnology, and in 2016–2018 also by a team from the National Museum in Warsaw.