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Forms of Life and Social Critique: Pasolini after Wittgenstein

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Abstract
Drawing on Pier Paolo Pasolini and his appropriation of Wittgenstein, this paper argues for the possibility of a radical sort of social critique based on the notion of form of life: the members of a society may not only have an objectionable form of life, but also lack a form of life altogether.

Here is a natural thought. If one is alive, one lives in one way or the other. One’s life will then have a certain form. Having a form of life comes therefore for free from the mere fact of being alive, in the simple sense of not yet being in the grave. Conversely, the idea of living without a form life appears to be an oxymoron. I am going to challenge this natural thought by looking at the late essays on politics and society of the 20th-century Italian author Pier Paolo Pasolini. The challenge will hinge on a notion of being alive that is more demanding than not yet being in the grave.

1. Pasolini on cultural genocide

Outside of Italy, Pasolini is best known as a film director, but he was also, among other things, a poet, novelist, and essayist. During the last two years of his life, he wrote regularly on major Italian newspapers and periodicals on various social and political issues. Most of those articles were collected in two volumes: Scritti corsari (say, "Writings from a Pirate"), published in 1975, and Lettere lettorane (translated in English as Lutheran Letters), published posthumously, but in accordance with the author’s own plan.

These articles were written after a decade, the 1960s, of unprecedented economic development in Italy. They were also written during a time of deep moral and cultural transformations, which include the liberalization of sexual morality and important civil rights reforms such as the legalization of divorce by popular vote in 1974 and the process that would lead to the legalization of abortion by popular vote in 1978. These were also years in which the Italian Communist Party would get about 30% of the votes. Pasolini was a Marxist and never recanted his political faith in spite of his early expulsion from the Communist Party. Moreover, as a gay man and artist, he had first-personal experience of the repressive character of traditional Italian morality. It would be natural to expect, on these bases, that Pasolini would cherish the transformations he was witnessing. His essays, however, constitute a sustained critique of those transformations. My interest here is in the form of that critique—and more specifically, in the conceptual framework in which it is cast, which makes central use of the notions of “culture” and “form of life.”

Pasolini’s main thesis is that

between 1961 and 1975 something essential changed: a genocide took place. A whole population was culturally destroyed. (1987: 101)

The destruction was caused by “consumerism,” the high-capitalist system of production that Pasolini often characterizes in terms of three features: “enormous quantities, superfluous goods, [and] hedonistic function” (1987: 118).

As may be expected from a Marxist, for Pasolini an economic system of production does not produce only commodities, but also, as he puts it, a kind of “humanity” (1987: 133). The effect of the advent of consumerism in Italy, for Pasolini, was the destruction of the culture of the popular Italian masses—namely, the culture of the rural communities of peasants and of sub-urban communities of sub-proletarians, which retained for Pasolini a rural character. Such a culture, for Pasolini, had remained essentially unchanged for centuries. That popular culture survived until the late 1950 and was the subject of his novels and movies of that period, such as the well-known novels and films about the Roman suburban slums. Destroying that culture amounted, for him, to destroying a kind of human being. To see why this is the case, we need to understand what he means by “culture.”

Pasolini uses the term in what he often characterizes as an “anthropological” sense:

the word “culture”...applies above all (according to the scientific use made of it by ethnologists, anthropologists, and the best sociologists) to the knowledge and the way of life of a country in its totality, that is to the historical nature of a people with the infinite series of norms—often unwritten and even unconscious—which determine its vision of reality and regulate its behavior. (1987: 60)

In this connection, Pasolini refers explicitly to Wittgenstein’s notion of “form of life”:

Class struggle has been until now also a struggle for the prevalence of another form of life (to quote Wittgenstein potential anthropologist...), that is to say, of another culture. (1987: 123)

Pasolini often characterizes a culture or form of life as a system of values. The system of values of the Italian popular masses, for example, included classic conservative values such as “Church, patriotism, family, obedience, order, parsimony, morality” (1975: 129, my translation). To have a system of values, however, is something that goes beyond, and does not even require, explicit allegiance to those values. A system of values is something that pervasively informs one’s life. Talking about the recently destroyed culture of the Roman plebeian masses, for example, Pasolini notices that it used to give them “gestures, mimicry, words, behavior, knowledge, criteria for judgment” (1987: 103). A system of values or culture informs all aspects of one’s thoughts and actions, all the way down to the way one talks, the way one walks, and even to one’s own physical appearance. Pasolini is committed here to an idea of total expressivity that leads sometimes to very controversial views, such as the claim that class struggle involved until recently classes that “were also—how to say it?—racially different” (1987: 123). The same idea of total
expressivity underlies also part of his cinematic aesthetics, such as the principled choice, in the 1961 movie Accatone, of employing non-professional actors from the social context represented in the movie. In order to present on film the culture of the Roman slums, Pasolini thought, he needed actors whose language, gestures, and body had been shaped by that culture.

Consumerism, for Pasolini, destroyed the Italian popular culture in this very pervasive sense of the term. What did it produce in its place? His view is that consumerism destroyed the old popular culture or form of life, without replacing it with any other culture or form of life. It left most Italian people without a form of life. Consider these two passages:

We are dealing...with the loss of the values of an entire culture: values which, however, have not been replaced with the values of a new culture (unless we are to “adapt”—which would after all be the tragically right thing to do—and consider consumerism a “culture.”) (1987: 61)

Talking about the Italian youth, on whom the effects of consumerism are most visible for him, Pasolini writes:

The same enigmatic, pale and smiling faces indicate their moral imponderability: their being suspended between the loss of old values and the unfilled acquisition of new ones: their total lack of any idea of their own "function." (1987: 107)

The parenthetical remark in the former passage expresses some ambivalence on Pasolini’s part about the question of whether consumerism is a culture—a culture that, perhaps, we have good reasons to resist. Here, however, I want to take seriously the suggestion that is presented without qualification in the second quotation—namely, that the popular masses at issue have not acquired an objectionable form of life, but have been left without any form of life. From this perspective, consumerism can be described as a culture only in a derivative sense, perhaps in the way we speak of a corpse as a body, or of a fake gun as a gun.

In an obvious sense, the Italians who Pasolini was talking about were alive. His claim faces therefore the challenge I mentioned at the beginning: How can we make sense of the idea of living without a form of life? I will approach this question by considering an analogous challenge that arises in the context of the interpretation of Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

2. Wittgenstein’s critique of metaphysics

Wittgenstein contrasts the “ordinary” use of language with its “metaphysical” use, and describes his task as that of bringing [ing] words back from their metaphysical to their ordinary use (“PI 1958: 116). He also writes that the result of philosophy, as he seeks to practice it, is the “uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense” (119). The reason why we need to lead words back from their metaphysical use to their ordinary use is that, in their metaphysical use, they are actually nonsensical. But Wittgenstein also characterizes meaning, in the relevant sense, as use. He writes for instance: “For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word ‘meaning,’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (43). This implies that the so-called metaphysical use of words is not, strictly speaking, a use of words at all. And in fact, Wittgenstein writes that when we do metaphysics, “language goes on holiday” (38). The suggestion is that words, in those circumstances, don’t do any real work.

Even though we voice them, we are not really using them. In so far as the ordinary use of language can be thought of as consisting of a series of language games, metaphysics is not a language game.

This aspect of Wittgenstein’s philosophy invites, among others, the following objection: “How can you say that metaphysicians do not really use language? They talk and write a lot, and take themselves to be saying something and to be arguing with each other” Wittgenstein’s contention, as I understand it, is that the so-called metaphysical use of words is only the illusion of a use of words: something that, when thought through, falls apart, or to the ground, like a house of cards (cf. 118). The purported use at issue is inherently unstable, the mere expression of a confusion, and does not, accordingly, amount to a genuine use at all.

3. Back to Pasolini

I suggest that the condition of the Italian popular masses of the mid 1970s, as Pasolini sees it, is analogous to the condition of Wittgenstein’s metaphysician. The latter only appears to be using words. Pasolini’s Italians, similarly, only appear to be alive. The proposal is to understand Pasolini as keeping the conceptual link between living and having a form of life, just as Wittgenstein keeps the conceptual link between use and meaning. Pasolini, accordingly, should be understood as saying that consumerism reduced his fellow Italians to a condition that is only the semblance of a life. In both cases, we are left with the mere outer shell of the genuine phenomenon. Wittgenstein’s metaphysician produces mere words, devoid of meaning, and Pasolini’s Italians merely go through the motions of a genuine life.

This thought requires a notion of life that goes beyond mere physiological and psychological well-functioning. It goes beyond, to use my initial image of speech, not yet being in the grave, and involves what we may call a spiritual dimension. This is again analogous to Wittgenstein’s notion of use, which goes beyond the mere voicing of familiar words.

I want to consider briefly two moments in Pasolini’s essays which support the claim that lacking a form of life, for him, amounts to not really living. This will also give some substance to the relevant idea of not being really alive.

The first moment is a remarkable description of how Pasolini perceived the new inhabitants of the poor Roman suburbs, in comparison to those he had portrayed, fourteen years earlier, in Accatone:

If I had taken a long journey and had returned after several years, walking through the magnificent plebeian metropolis, I would have had the impression that all its inhabitants had been deported and exterminated, replaced in the streets and plots by washed-out, ferocious, unhappy ghosts...The young boys, deprived of their values and their models as if of their blood, have become larval copies of a different way of existing and of conceiving existence: that of the petite bourgeoisie. (1987: 101)

The idea of being deprived of a form of life is here articulated through the image of being reduced to the status of a bloodless ghost, the mere simulacrum of a living human being.

The second moment concerns the relation between life, culture, and linguistic creativity. Here is how Pasolini de-
scribes the culture and language of the Italian popular masses before the advent of consumerism:

Left to itself for centuries, that is to say, to its own immobility, that culture had elaborated values and models of behavior which were absolute... Values and models passed immutably from father to son. Yet there was a constant regeneration. It's enough to consider their language (which no longer exists): it was continually invented, although the lexical and grammatical models were always the same. There was not a single moment of the day, within the circle of slums that formed a magnificent plebeian metropolis, when a linguistic invention did not echo through the streets or plots. A sign that the culture was “alive.” (1958: 101)

To this linguistic creativity, Pasolini contrasts the almost aphasic character of the new popular youth:

If on the one hand they speak better—that is, they have assimilated the degrading average Italian—on the other they are almost aphasic, they talk old, incomprehensible dialects or are simply silent, every so often emitting guttural screams and interjections, always obscene. (1987: 14)

The language of the new youth is here presented in almost sub-human terms—as if the sounds they voice were not even words, but grunts. The reference to the “degrading average Italian” suggests instead the soul-less, parrot-like repetition of ready-made formulas and is connected to another theme that pervades Pasolini’s essays: the stereotypical and conformist character of the new Italian people. In either case, we are confronted with the idea of a less than fully human language.

I have two conclusions. The first is that, following Pasolini, we can construe the notion of a form of life so that it makes sense to say that human beings may have different forms of life, or no form of life. The second is that, in the context of moral and political reflection, we may encounter not only the question of how to improve our form of life, but also the question of whether we have a form of life in the first place. Having a form of life does not come for free from the mere fact of being physiologically and psychologically alive, but is a moral and political achievement.

Bibliography


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