
Pier Paolo Pasolini's Pendulum Swing on Fascism

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Abstract: The following work is a case study. Its purpose is to reconstruct a particular situation involving the recognition and understanding of fascism. This situation is determined by both history and the social dynamics of the present day. The time and place is Italy of the 1960s and 1970s, the observer – Pier Paolo Pasolini. But not because he offers us an original, complex and versatile theory of fascism. On the contrary, Pasolini can be superficial and rash, while his polemic passion often devours the argument and the analysis. However, Pasolini's method of intellectual and political involvement allows us to use it as a keystone for a makeshift synthesis of a certain version of leftist anti-fascism.

Keywords: Pasolini; fascism; communism; working class; history of Italy

1.

There are several reasons why Pier Paolo Pasolini is a useful author. The most important of them is by no means the panache, uniqueness and multifaceted style of his work, which are qualities he possesses which we do not question. From our point of view the benefit that Pasolini as an author offers is that he makes a stubborn and tireless attempt to eradicate what Michel Foucault called the principle of discourse control: “no one will enter the order of discourse if he does not meet certain requirements or if he is not entitled to do so from the beginning of the game. More specifically: not all areas of discourse are equally open and prone to penetration. Some are strictly protected” (Foucault, 2002, p. 27). Of course, in Pasolini's case it was not about the access barrier determined by cultural capital. From his poetic debut in 1942 he was considered a golden child of Italian art. He therefore obtained the right to participate in legitimate discourse earlier than anyone else in his generation and, in this respect, could only be compared to Rimbaud. Therefore, we are talking here about a different form of access control, something in the shape of a “society for discourse”, whose principles are based on ideology and identity. Pasolini's strategy consisted of an earnest reversal of Groucho Marx's famous saying: “I don't want to belong to any club that would accept me as one of its members” (Marx, 1959, p. 32). Pier Paolo at all costs wanted to belong to all the clubs which did not accept people like him. We are justified here in speaking of a strategy, because it certainly is not a set of isolated incidents.

When he found himself standing before the Catholic Church Pasolini appeared as a Catholic, and when before the Communist Party he appeared as a communist. He was excluded from the church along with other people as a result of the decree *Scomunica ai comunisti*, issued by Pope Pius XII in June 1949, and already by October of that year he was excluded within the communist party, becoming the first of numerous dissidents from the Italian Communist Party. When in March 1968 the season of riots and a brutal struggle between the police and radical students began, Pasolini devoted to this event a journalistic poem entitled originally *I hate you dear students*

You look like a chip off the old block
A good race doesn't lie
[...]
When you were fighting on Valle Giulia yesterday
with policemen,
I supported the policemen.
Because they are children of the poor. (Pasolini, 2012c, p. 223)

Denunciation of the arrogance of left-wing youth has a long and quite noble history. However, Pasolini is treading on thin ice here. First of all, soon student and worker blood will be spilled, starting *anni di piombo* – the Italian Years of Lead. Secondly, Pier Paolo acts as a self-appointed spokesperson for the Italian Communist Party, a party which the new generation of radicals did not want to hear about anymore. In this context, sayings such as “journalists of the world are licking your ass”, “because you are bourgeois, and therefore anti-communists” sound as if they were about a parallel, Italian version of the March 68 events [in communist Poland]. Pasolini is aware of this. Along with his poem he provides a commentary titled, not insignificantly, *Apologia*. He describes it as an “ugly poem” – “ugly poems are those that on their own are not enough to express what the author wants to express: that is, their meaning is deformed by connotations and all these connotations obscure the real meaning”. Therefore, “this is about provoking, which is perfectly acceptable (but the provocations of fascists and the police are unacceptable)” (all above quotations from: Pasolini, 2012c, pp. 226 and next).

However, a few years later Pasolini became the editor in charge of the daily *Lotta Continua*, part of the radical Marxist movement of the same name, which was notorious at the time for “fighting with the police”. He also became the originator and co-creator of the panegyric *12 Dicembre* in which *Lotta* is the protagonist.

Pasolini makes a similar pendulum swing on the topic of abortion. He writes about homicide and the supposedly universal experience of prenatal life and laments that legalizing abortion “will make sex, heterosexual intercourse, easier. There will be no more obstacles to abortion”. He predicts that abortion is “convenient for most” and “most desire it” (Pasolini, 1975, p. 1). But Pasolini would not be himself if his last word on the matter were this mixture of prejudice, superstition, barely concealed misogyny,

and poor metaphysics. Pier Paolo joins the anti-clerical Radical Party and supports its demands for an abortion referendum. As predicted, the referendum ends with a pro-choice victory, although this will happen only after his death.

Unlike the contemporary French revolutionist Guy Debord, who refused to participate in both political organizations and the artistic circle, Pasolini's plan was to participate in every circle, at least in all of those in which it was possible to make a pendulum swing. Pasolini's cinema – as a core element of his art – also works in a similar way. Artistic criticism of the cultural industry can only take place within its own circle. Pasolini's films always keep up with the trends of commercial cinema, its codes, the principle of scandal and transgression. The critic of the sexual revolution benefits from it, both artistically and personally. Even the fact that he will become a martyr will not change that.

2.

The above remarks suggest the application of hermeneutics to Pasolini's texts, a discipline distant from the author's category and close to the perception of a concentration of discourse. This concentration takes place in a particular environment, the shape of which is determined both by the history of Italy and by the extraordinary dynamics of Italian society in the thirty post-war years.

More than 600 years have passed since Petrarch climbed Mont Ventoux to admire the view, and, as Jacob Burckhardt put it, "invented the modern man". More than three hundred years have passed since Galileo Galilei laid the foundation for modern science, and not much less since Giambattista Vico created the *Scienza Nuova* – the first paradigm of social science. It is no coincidence however that the latter is perhaps the most forgotten of the great philosophers of the early modern period. Modernity can be described as a process of the relegation of Italy from a position of cultural dominance to marginalization. In the nineteenth century it is the Italians who are looking to the North to discover what the *Zeitgeist* is. The North, on the other hand, is not losing interest in Italy, but it is an interest of a completely different kind.

"Naples is a paradise; everyone lives in a state of intoxicated self-forgetfulness, myself included. I seem to be a completely different person whom I hardly recognize. Yesterday I thought to myself: Either you were mad before, or you are mad now" – Goethe will write in his *Italian Journey* – "we are all pilgrims seeking Italy" (Goethe, 1970, p. 209). Northern Europeans explore Italy equipped with the three-volume Baedeker guide. They are searching for the sensuality of *la dolce vita* and the vibrancy of opera, both unavailable in northern lands of reason and progress. They are also in

search of paid love at an affordable price. The heart of the Roman Empire, the homeland of law and universalism, is orientalized.

Pasolini's early art in particular absorbs and nurtures this image of Italy, although with an important caveat: it is not about Italy as such, but the Italian folk classes and the shady fringes of these classes – bearers not so much of traditional values, but unbridled vitality – a prehistoric source of all meaningful things. This affirmation of the “lumpenproletariat”, opposed to the “official” working class, associates Pier Paolo with Western European Maoism, which considered the industrial proletariat of the West nothing less than a class enemy. However, this association is merely ostensible. In fact, Pasolini, instead of viewing this “lumpenproletariat” as a revolutionary class to whom the earth belongs, considers it the most fragile of all classes – bound to be destroyed by capitalist modernization. Pasolini wants to be the chronicler and spokesperson of this fragile class.

Italian is the only language in which the term “fascism” does not require translation, not only linguistically, but also politically and culturally. Fascism is indigenous to the Italian language. The word has no adjective, it is given directly, and does not require any genealogical or comparative studies. At the same time, in some perverse manner it restores a central spot for Italians in the global economy of ideas. *Il fascismo* is a Sèvres model of the world's entire family of fascisms, it is an export commodity, a trademark, and not only a political revolution but also an aesthetic one. After the impasse of the great *Risorgimento* project and the nightmare of the Great War, fascism is sexy. Its brutal unraveling is however more embarrassing than in Germany. This is because it reveals not so much the immensity of atrocity and cruelty, which fascists always hinted at, but grotesqueness, powerlessness, falsity, and a total lack of agency. The dictatorship, which had proclaimed itself totalitarian,¹ turned out to be a spectacle.

In this context, the extraordinary dynamic of post-war Italy, a dynamic without which it is impossible to understand Pasolini's frenetic thought, can seem paradoxical or at least surprising. Italy is experiencing a second rebirth but without any great rebirth plan. Moreover, all this is happening in an environment of limited independence, ideological provisionality, political instability, institutional corruption, a resurrected mafia, murders of the “deep state”, class struggles straight out of a Marxist textbook, and finally neofascist, and then also left-wing, terrorism (though it is not insignificant that Pier Paolo did not live to see the latter).

The scale of *miracolo economico* cannot be overestimated. Between 1951 and 1971 real income per person tripled. In 1955, only 3% of households had a refrigerator and only 1% a washing machine. In 1975, these numbers grew to 94% and 76% respectively (George & Lawson, 1980, p. 196). In the 1960s, the Lamborghini Miura was the fastest car in the world, while the Fiat 500 was the cheapest. Both delighted. *Linea Italiana*, a synonym for Italian design, changed the face of the earth. Torino's Olivetti competed

1 “Fascism is totalitarian, and the Fascist State, as a synthesis and a unification of all values, interprets, develops, and potentiates the whole life of a people” (Mussolini, 1935, p. 22).

with IBM for hegemony over the world's fledgling computer market. Fellini, Antonioni, Visconti and Pasolini himself set the trends in world cinema which finally became attracted to higher culture. But the dirty spaghetti western and macabre Cinema cannibale – Italian B movies – played perhaps an even greater role in the history of cinema (Weiner & Cline, 2010, pp. 118–120). The dynamic of changes is revolutionizing Italian society. During the course of 20 years, nine million Italians decide to emigrate, this time neither to America, nor to Belgium, but rather from the south of the country to the north, from villages to cities (McCarthy, 2000, p. 12). At the end of the 1960s, the Fiat Mirafiori plant employed fifty thousand workers, and 60% of them were newcomers from the *mezzogiorno*. They are more radical than their unionized colleagues from the north. Instead of negotiating with employers they prefer striking and sabotage. Their slogan is *vogliamo tutto* – “we want everything!” (Wright, 2002, p. 119).

An influential Marxist will write about them with apparent self-criticism:

We too put capitalist development first, with workers being a secondary concern. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity and start anew: the beginning of that is class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to the struggles of the working class, it follows behind them”. (Tronti, 1966, p. 90)

The Left is having its dream about power and might.

The 1970s brought a feminist revolution. At the *Lotta Continua* congress in 1976 a clash ensued between “donne” and “operai” – the male and female wings of the movement. The conflict concerned both policy as well as the problem of machismo. Women, usually doomed to precarious work and lower wages, proposed that they get paid for their work at home. They also demanded a right to separatism – for example to women-only protests. The radical left's powerful platform would not survive this crisis (Bobbio, 1988, pp. 172–176), which is the only instance the author is aware of when a key political organization falls apart as the result of a female rebellion.

3.

Pier Paolo Pasolini is a leftist anti-fascist, which is important because state-promoted anti-fascism is the founding myth of the Italian Republic. The Republic itself was the result of fascism being overcome, and all anti-fascists, in particular Christian democrats and communists, are invited to the republican table (although, in the case of the communists, provided that they will stay away from the government). However, for the left this antifascism espoused by the Republic is spurious and merely a cover to hide the absorption of fascist officers. It is insincere, forced, and superficial at best. And indeed, the right-wing very quickly loses enthusiasm even for this “official anti-fascism”. For the

left, meanwhile, anti-fascism remains on the one hand an unfinished project and on the other a source of convenient legitimacy (Bravo, 2006, p. 13). The latter leads to a quite annoying habit of describing as fascist anything that is right-wing. However, the former has more important consequences: if anti-fascism is an unfinished project, what exactly are those nonpublic but effective contemporary mutations of fascism? Because it is clear that this is not about the remnants of state fascism in the form of Movimento Sociale Italiano or neofascist terrorists. The assumption at the outset is therefore that fascism is not what it seems to be.

“Everyone, therefore, is pretending that they do not see (or, perhaps, they truly do not see), what the new reaction really is; And that’s why everyone is fighting the old reaction, which is just the mask of this new one” (Pasolini, 2012b, p. 249). Pier Paolo’s task as an organic intellectual (in the same way as Antonio Gramsci, a thinker with whom Pasolini shared much in common) will be to tear off the mask. “A real restoration or a reaction” – writes Pasolini – “doesn’t restore anything, and even strives to erase the past with its ‘fathers’, its religions, its ideologies and forms of life”. This revolution “above all destroyed the right” and occurred “through the progressive accumulation of novelties” and “a silent revolution of infrastructures”. It is easy to notice that here Pasolini follows the path from Marx and Engel’s *Communist Manifesto*, “The bourgeoisie, in the places where it came to power, demolished all feudal, patriarchal and idyllic relations. It severed mercilessly the complex feudal bonds which shackled a man to his ‘natural superior’, and did not leave any other ties between people, besides plain interest” (Engels & Marks, 1986, p. 528). There exists however a significant difference between Pasolini and the classics of Marxism – the latter did not call this process reactionary, but, to the contrary, revolutionary, and in any event ambiguous ... Pasolini refuses to grant this process any emancipatory value. (It is noteworthy that he describes in this manner the period that the contemporary left has hailed as thirty miraculous years of regulated capitalism). He is implacable, condemning left-wing attempts to “join the new world”. “Ultraleftists (with their insolence and triumphalism) continue moving deeper into this illusion, attributing to this new form of history, created by technological civilization, a miraculous capability of liberation and rebirth” (Pasolini, 2012d, p. 249). This criticism is aimed at operaists such as Negri and Tronti, but in fact also includes the new, uprooted Fiat workers who instead of union discipline and left-wing ideals choose strikes to fight for wages. With a wage they want to, in turn, join the capitalist consumption cycle.

Why however does capitalist development, that Pasolini in a manner characteristic of leftist criticism juxtaposes with progress, have to be fascist? Because it is totalitarian.

No fascist centralism has managed to achieve what the centralism of consumer civilization has [...] actual cultural models are wiped out [...] It can therefore be said that ‘tolerating’ hedonistic ideology, which the new authorities wanted, is the worst repression in the history of mankind. [...] The work of homogenization was initiated, destroying all authenticity and the concrete. (Pasolini, 2012a, p. 283)

Why is this new order worse than “fascist fascism”? Because

Italians with enthusiasm accepted this new model that television foists on them in accordance with the production standards that create prosperity. [...] For example, a few years ago the lumpenproletariat respected culture and were not ashamed of their own ignorance. In fact, they were proud of their folk model of illiteracy. [...] Now, the opposite is happening – they are ashamed of their own ignorance: they have renounced their cultural model. (The very young do not even remember it). (Pasolini, 2012a, p. 285)

The similarity between fascism and the regime of *Democrazia Cristiana* (which is neither Christian nor democratic) is that both try to axiologically and materially colonize the people. But the difference is that under Mussolini “awareness was not entangled in this: fascist models were only the masks that were put on and removed”. The conviction about the superficial nature of fascism culminates in the mitigation of anti-fascism. Referring to the bomb attacks in Rome (1969) and Brescia (1974) Pasolini writes: “We, the progressives, antifascists and people on the left, are responsible for these slaughters as well [...] In all actuality our behavior towards the fascists was racist: that is, hastily and mercilessly we determined that in a racist manner they are predestined to be fascists”. Meanwhile, Pasolini continues: “perhaps one word would have sufficed for that not to occur. [...] Perhaps even, they were eighteen-year-old, adolescent boys and girls who, out of pure despair, blindly joined this terrible adventure”. (quotations in this paragraph from: Pasolini, 2012a, p. 284). Although being in a state of “pure despair” can sometimes be part of the explanation for terrorism, the presumption that such a state existed among representatives of Italian neo-fascism in the 1970s can be considered dangerous. However, Pasolini remains faithful to his oft-repeated diagnosis: fascism is an empty shell, and true evil lurks elsewhere.

Most explicit in this respect is his speech during a festival of the communist journal *l'Unita* in Milan in 1974, a year before his murder. The text is titled “Genocide”. Pasolini is perfectly aware of the abuse he is committing. At the outset he justifies his supposed “inaccuracy or terminological uncertainty”. However, this is not a very credible excuse. “I argue that the destruction and substitution of values in today’s Italian society also leads, without slaughters and mass executions, to the liquidation of large areas of this society” (Pasolini, 2012b, p. 287). This is more than just a metaphor, but rather a homology. After all, the bourgeoisie had already carried out an extermination of the “lumpenproletariat and certain colonial people” before (Pasolini, 2012b, p. 288), which Marx described as primitive accumulation. In the same way, a “large part” of today’s Italian society is subject to a similar genocide, that is, an “assimilation into the style and values of bourgeois life”. Pasolini cites here an authority – a “man of my generation who saw the war, Nazis and the SS”. As a result of capitalist conformity “a terrifying shadow of a swastika is being cast over our cities” (Pasolini, 2012b, p. 293). It is difficult to say whether this comparison, in a country where since the 1960s every intellectual had

been acquainted with Primo Levi's memoirs,² can be described as outrageous. If so, this is the sort of scandal that Martin Heidegger caused in 1949 when he presented the mechanization of agriculture and gas chambers as part of the same technological process (Gordon, 2014).

But, despite all this, Pasolini is not a Heidegger. He was murdered in November of 1975 on a beach in Ostia. The murder was never explained, but a homophobic and anticommunist motive behind the crime is probable. What is certain however is that the police tried to conceal evidence. Three weeks after his death the premiere of his last movie, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, took place at the Paris Film Festival. The picture is entirely devoted to fascism. And despite the presence of many themes and figures typical for Pasolini this time fascism is not euphemized, it is not an empty shell, and is shown instead in all its murderous glamor. Pasolini made his pendulum swing.

4.

Most of the quotes in this text come from the book *Po ludobójstwie*, a collection of Pasolini's political and philosophical texts published (and, it is worth noting, excellently edited and translated) by the heavily right-wing quarterly *Kronos*. It is easy to understand why publishers are so interested in him – despite being hated by the right, Pier Paolo Pasolini was far more willing to foul his own left-wing nest. And even though fiercely criticizing one's own circles is an activity that deserves praise, it is not always successful. Pasolini's analysis of fascism is characterized by a set of gestures which are more likely to obscure its image rather than illuminate it. First of all, he changes the meaning – real fascism is something different than historical fascism. Secondly, he reduces it – fascism lacks social substance, it is a manifestation of forces more ominous than itself. Lastly, he trivializes it.

Pasolini is not a leading intellectualist of the post-war left and yet his persistent attempt to understand fascism in conjunction with capitalist modernization places him in a certain group of figures of thought that remain valid to this day.

Hannah Arendt's figures of thought of fascism seem to capture the essence of this historical omission very well. On the one hand fascism is lost in the broad category of totalitarianism, while, on the other hand, it is reduced to an extreme form of social conformism. For the same reasons, fascism is supposed to be socially and psychologically superficial.

2 The second volume of Levi's memoirs, which gained tremendous publicity in Italy and elsewhere, was published in 1963.

I believe now that evil is never 'radical', only extreme, and that it does not have any depth or any demonic dimension. It can fill and ravage the whole world because it spreads like a fungus overgrowing a surface, 'deprecating thoughts', as I wrote, because a thought tries to see a certain depth, reach the roots, while the moment it deals with evil, it loses sense, because it touches nothingness. That is the 'banality of evil'. (Arendt, 1998, p. 401)³

Such fascism appears invariably and contrary to historical truth – as a paper tiger, even if with iron claws.

Then again, for a large part of the post-war Left inspired by the Frankfurt School and then also Foucault, Deleuze and Agamben, the criticism of fascism, to paraphrase the opinion of a young Marx on religion, was supposed to constitute the premise of all social criticism: criticism of instrumental reason, microfascisms, biopower, the regime of simulacrum, colonialism and even neoliberalism. Even if some of these clues are cognitively efficient, too often they lead to the dilution of fascism as such, in its specificity and uniqueness. What is however interesting is the strong unwillingness of the contemporaneous left to interpret right-wing populism in the categories of fascism despite its quite evident ties with the extreme right. Researchers with great authority such as Nancy Fraser or Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe, 2018) interpret right-wing populism above all as a people's rebellion against neoliberal elites. Thus, they see in it an opportunity rather than a threat. Fraser in particular emphatically expresses this thought:

Populism is part of the world's historical dynamics. It is symptomatic of a crisis of capitalism's hegemony, or rather, a crisis of the hegemony of a specific form of capitalism in which we live: globalist, neoliberal, financial [...]. Liberalism has a long history of delegitimizing opposition – it stigmatizes its opponents as fascists, Stalinists and the like. This is what we are dealing with today when it comes to the term populism. It is widely used by liberals to discredit the people's forces rebelling against their power. (Mehta & Fraser, 2018)

In the 1930s, the dominant conviction among the Left was that fascism is a tool in the hands of capital. Today it can be considered a legitimate opposition to it. After all, from a historical perspective it is difficult to deny that fascism was a real opposition to a certain form of global financial capitalism. There are many indications that some on the contemporary Left have made a pendulum swing similar to Pasolini's.

When it comes to "fascist fascism" the Left's attitude can be described not so much as unbelief as constant disbelief. Disbelief that a paper tiger, who devoured 70 million people in just a few years, can still return. At issue here is the fairly enigmatic conviction that fascism is in some fundamental way archaic and out of date, or, in other words, that it is a smoke screen or at best a farce which few would fall for.

Translated from the Polish by Samuel Shannon

3 Translator's note: this quote originally comes from a letter written by Hannah Arendt to Gershom Scholem in July 1964. For the original German see: Arendt, 2010.

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Piera Paola Pasoliniego pętla faszystowska

Abstrakt: Poniższy tekst jest studium przypadku. Jego celem jest odtworzenie pewnej sytuacji rozpoznawania i rozumienia faszyzmu. Sytuacja ta jest wyznaczona zarówno przez historię, jak i przez społeczną dynamikę współczesności. Czas i miejsce to Włochy lat sześćdziesiątych i siedemdziesiątych XX wieku. Podmiotem rozpoznającym jest Pier Paolo Pasolini. Nie dlatego, że oferuje nam oryginalną, złożoną i wszechstronną teorię faszyzmu. Przeciwnie, Pasolini bywa powierzchowny, gwałtowny, jego pasja polemiczna często pochłania argument i analizę. Jednak sposób intelektualnego i politycznego zaangażowania Pasoliniego pozwala nam posłużyć się nim jako zwornikiem w prowizorycznej syntezie pewnej wersji lewicowego antyfaszyzmu.

Słowa kluczowe: Pasolini; faszyzm; komunizm; klasa pracująca; historia Włoch



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