



*Travels in New York:  
Pier Paolo Pasolini's  
"Guerra Civile"*

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As A. Owen Aldridge has written in "Literature and Study of Man," modern anthropologists and ethnographers use the empirical perspective to delineate the particulars of a society. In a series of essays and interviews on his American experiences, filmmaker and author Pier Paolo Pasolini assumed the roles of historian, philosopher, and anthropologist in order to develop both a symbolic and cognitive comprehension of the United States

and by extension of his own persona. Through these examinations of American culture and politics, Pasolini was able to dissect and conceptualize his own views on how to construct a viable resistance to the destructive consequences of bourgeois values.

In 1966, Pasolini visited the United States for the first time. The occasion was a screening of his film *Hawks and Sparrows* at the New York Film Festival. He arrived in New York at a time of “discontent and exaltation, desperation and hope.” The 1960s was indeed a decade of upheaval throughout America and Europe, and Pasolini, who seemed always to be on the edge of some turmoil, found himself quite at home in the midst of antiwar protests and rising black consciousness. For some time, he had been particularly troubled by the inefficacy of the political Left and its artistic attendant, the avant-garde, in Europe and especially in Italy. He had often railed against the failures of the Left to remain an active and viable force in the lives of what he called the *sottoproletariato*. The vibrancy of the old resistance

movement that had been so crucial during the Second World War had disappeared. A malaise had settled among the radical Left—a “spiritual crisis” was how Pasolini typically termed it. The economic and political changes that had been sweeping through Italy—the so-called “miracle”—convinced him that the existing radical movements in Europe were no longer legitimate alternatives to the increasing onslaught of neocapitalist consumerism. Many of his essays during the '60s focused on this issue and were collected in *Heretical Empiricism*. In “Guerra Civile” from that work and in other pieces, Pasolini recounted his American visits and revealed that his few weeks in America were powerfully stimulating and reinvigorated his commitment to radical political change.

When citing the virtues of two ideologists, Tom Hayden of the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and Jimmy Garrett of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), Pasolini was pleased to point out that each believed communism to be a bankrupt

ideology, an observation he shared after having visited Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. The language he used is certainly Marxist, though it does reflect some reordering of the traditional polemics. With reference to the need for a decentralized state, workers' control, and the elimination of the dominant bureaucratic elite, he certified his displeasure with the failure of the revolutionary movements to continue their march toward those goals. This failure was largely due to an inability to actualize the language of the struggle; that is, these movements were primarily ideological structures encased in a ponderous and unresponsive bureaucracy that did not satisfy the needs of the very people it sought to liberate. What excited Pasolini about America was that while the potential for revolutionary change was present, it was not mired in any linguistic muddle, but was rather in the hands of those who saw the problems purely in "democratic terms." This retreat from ideology in favor of humanity was especially appealing to Pasolini, who had seen the European Left

steadily recede from its commitment to the poor during the postwar period. The chaotic student movements were not staid organizations, lost in the tired clichés of their own jargon, but almost non-entities, ideas, pure and free from some ossified historical cell; in short, human and alive. As Pasolini wrote, "Those who belong to the New Left are recognizable immediately, and among them is born that kind of love that tied the partisans together."

One area that touched Pasolini deeply was the disastrous effects of capitalism on the Italian immigrant condition. This proved to be particularly disheartening for him since it was the prospect of financial reward that had enticed so many of his countrymen to immigrate to the United States. He took note of the decades of Italian migration, marveling at how the psychology of the immigrants remained unaffected by the myriad difficulties they encountered. Pasolini visited the more centralized areas of Italian settlement in New York and discovered a total "veneration" for the United States and

its institutions: “They’re still children. Children who are too obedient or too desperate.”

However, the uniqueness of America, exhibited in its ethnic variance, was not lost on Pasolini, who cited the humble origins of most Americans as contributory to the country’s diversity. But the traditional European path to Marxism had never materialized in the United States. The American masses maintained a strong aversion to communism, fearing it would reduce everyone to some ignoble base denominator. In such a world, the power of ethnicity would be eliminated and individualism would count for nothing. What was especially ironic for Pasolini was that this “leveling” was precisely what the American people sought. So while economic disparity had certainly created class divisions, divisions that the sottoproletariato found unacceptable, all other elements of classical class warfare were rejected as a threat to personal identity.

But while Pasolini bore witness to the uncompromising acceptance of institutional America

by the immigrants, he was hard-pressed to identify an “average” American. Certainly the retention of Old World culturalisms made visible the average German or Italian, but no such American equivalent could be found. “This is the thing which perhaps filled me with amazement in America....This ‘average American’—physically, materially, visually—doesn’t exist! How can one summarize in one ‘type’ all the extraordinary types who wander around Manhattan?”

It was this inability to synthesize all America into something generic that was the core of what Pasolini found troubling with the United States. Since there did not seem to be any common denominator by which to characterize the American psyche, he believed Americans were incapable of attaining any measure of the self-awareness so necessary for a successful revolutionary consciousness. How else, he thought, could one explain his being unable to find anyone in New York City to define racism? These Americans, unlike their European counterparts, had succumbed

completely to a self-perception that was at best illusory and at worst destructive. As long as the American masses continued to cling to illusions about their societal status, they would be prevented from confronting the same forces that had relegated them to their powerless positions. Pasolini believed that such a confrontation was essential for developing a radical consciousness that could result in economic reordering.

This did not mean that Americans were incapable of conceptualizing their situation, however. In truth, Pasolini believed they already had an understanding of democracy and that there had been a history of strong unionism for some time among the working class. Nonetheless, it still required what he termed a cathartic immersion through “a Calvary of the blacks” and of Vietnam. It was these contradictions inherent in the American sentience that both confused and intrigued Pasolini. In order to initiate the requisite class consciousness, Americans needed to draw upon what the Europeans called idealism or what he identified

in America as “spiritualism.” More precisely, Pasolini described it as an Anglo-Saxon moralism, quite middle-class and very pervasive.

Therefore, traditional class consciousness emanated in the United States not from the conventional European genesis, such as workers’ strikes or trade unionism, but “in pacifist and nonviolent manifestations which are dominated...by an intelligent spiritualism.” While spiritualism may seem out of place in Marxist dogma, for Pasolini it defined precisely the paradox of his philosophy. While generally extolling the virtues of communism and affirming his own atheism, Pasolini never abandoned the fundamental roots of his Catholic childhood. His was what biographer Enzo Siciliano called a “twentieth-century religiosity, from which all relations with a personalized God are absent.”

Indeed, at this point in his life, Pasolini believed that only Marxism and Christianity posed a viable threat to the onslaught of capitalist consumerism. As Ben Lawton has noted, “His pronouncements often suggest the Old

Testament prophet, passionate defender of a hard moral code, and fearless castigator of its betrayer.”

Pasolini’s spiritualism was actually an extension of the humanity he had seen in his visits to Harlem and Greenwich Village. In an interview with Pasolini in New York, in 1966, Oriana Fallaci revealed that the artist had been wandering the dangerous streets of the city, “looking for the sordid, unhappy, violent America that suits his own problems and tastes.” The city, however, had enlivened Pasolini. “New York...is a commitment....It fills you with a desire to do, to deal with, to change things.” Here was the America he had sought, quite unlike the European society he described as stupid, cowardly, and petty. This America offered the brotherhood he so desperately desired. “I cannot not fall in love with American culture and not have perceived in it a literary rationale full of novelty, a new period of the resistance...completely devoid of that certain risorgimental and...pseudo-classical spirit,” Pasolini wrote in “Guerra Civile.”

Such a society necessitated a particular type of revolutionary, one imbued with a sincerity born of the race and student struggles. He saw genuineness to the American Left that was reflected not in any empty ideology or text but in a physical and intellectual commitment to the struggle. Culturally it evidenced itself for Pasolini during a “brotherly reading” given by the poet Allen Ginsberg, which reminded him of that other American beat writer, Jack Kerouac, whose visit to Italy had so upset the staid Italian literati. “Here is the new motto....Throw one’s body into the fight....Who is there in Italy, in Europe, who writes pushed by such a great, such a desperate force of confrontation?” asked Pasolini.

While Pasolini’s more concerted tributes to third-world history and culture would emerge later, most notably in his cinema, his commitment to their causes had long been established. He believed that the problems of the third world and the tragically failed responses of capitalism and Marxism to those problems were

symbolized most ardently in the American black man. Pasolini saw black Americans preparing themselves for armed conflict. He sought and found the fellowship of the sottoproletariato in the black community of Harlem. When he visited a mason in his tiny slum apartment who had been injured working, Pasolini noted that “lying on his poor bed, [he] welcomed us with the smile of a friend, of an accomplice, overcome by our forgotten partisan love.”

This connection to the resistance, so critical to Pasolini, marked much of what he had to say about race relations in America. Solidarity was best illustrated by the linkage of the student movement to the civil rights struggle, a linkage that assumed a numerical importance when Pasolini pointed out that the students who had joined the struggles in the Black Belt South made up approximately the same portion of their country’s population as the Italian partisans of the 1940s. Surely the progressive Left in America must then be a force to reckon with, he surmised, affording him

yet another opportunity to blast the Europeans when he saw “the protest, the pure and simple confrontation, the rebellion against consumerism” in the beatniks, a group attacked in Italy by “the old Stalinist moralism and Italian provincialism.”

There was indeed a civil war in America, and for Pier Paolo Pasolini, the battleground was racism. It was no different than the wars in Algeria or in Cuba or elsewhere in the third world. And it would be a mistake, he argued, to attribute the racism of poor whites to merely an ignorance of the Marxist dictum of class warfare. In fact, as members of the sottoproletariato, they were actually part of the same third-world problem.

Yet, the American working class would never embrace solidarity with the struggles of the world’s poor. Only three years later, Pasolini would return to New York City to find his enthusiasm and hope diminished. At a performance of the Living Theatre at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, he noted being among the very people to whom he had felt so emotionally drawn.

These New Yorkers were “generous, naïve, seemingly devoid of ambition and yet at the same time embittered by failure.” The city’s denizens, more specifically its youth, still held their attraction but now he sensed a moderation in their revolutionary zeal. Lamenting the absence of Ginsberg, Bob Dylan, and the ubiquitous antiwar protesters, Pasolini asked, in *Poet of Ashes*, “Where’s the real-life theatre, the real-life tragedy, acted out on the streets and...so very involving, alive, exhilarating? It’s all finished...leaving Nixon’s America to the burnt-out hippies, the smalltime gangsters and the throngs of desperate people.”

Still, this disillusionment with America did not mark the end of Pasolini’s emotional connection to New York City. It remained for him the poetic representation that Italy had ceased to be. Unlike his deep affection for Africa, an affection more rooted in viewing Africa as the modern equivalent to ancient Greece, New York was “a commitment, a war.” He likened his arrival at Grand Central Station to crusaders coming upon Jerusalem,

not as invaders but as pilgrims. He even contemplated setting his yet unrealized film on St. Paul here. This responsiveness was no facile déjà vu; rather, Pasolini immediately grasped the parallels to ancient Rome in the great urban expanse. The perceptible class divisions so common elsewhere were absent in New York. The underclass had been assimilated into a “monstrous and fascinating mixture of subproletariat and petit bourgeoisie.” Pasolini acknowledged that this morphing of the working class into the larger mass was anathema to the development of a viable workers’ consciousness; nonetheless, it could not be easily dismissed. “Obviously, my heart lies with the poor Negro or the poor Calabrian immigrant, and at the same time I feel respect for the establishment of the American system.” In his exuberance Pasolini would write, “I wish I was eighteen and could live my whole life here!” However, this quasi-acceptance of capitalist America did not translate into an abandonment of the essential core of his beliefs.

Certainly a case could be made that Pasolini’s

essay “Guerra Civile” fits well within the paradigm of traditional travel literature. A writer journeys to a foreign land, recording his impressions and providing commentary on and analysis of his experiences. But this work is no mere travelogue. The experience was turned inward and became not only an artistic motivation but also a psychological reordering. In *New World Journeys*, Angela Jeannet and Louise Barnett write, “America offers the Italian writer a chance to breathe freely, to feel relieved of an overbearing atmosphere, cast off from a closed society, unburdened in a way that is vaguely threatening for some, exhilarating for others.”

For Pier Paolo Pasolini, the need to recapture the spirit and renewal of radical reform that had been lost or surrendered by the Europeans had been satisfied by this encounter with America. According to Ben Lawton and Louise Barnett, in the student mobilizations and civil rights struggles he discovered a “locus of revolutionary hope and energy” that convinced him the resistance was

still alive, though manifest in quite new forms.

But there was also a deeply personal void that he needed to fill. His life, which had become so public, and his art, which seemed stalled at a crossroads, had been seeking some direction, some purpose. In “The Poet as Anthropologist,” Celia A. Daniels notes, “As the poet breaks the barriers of his traditional perceptions of his world, he opens himself up to new possibilities. He allows his life to be changed by what he discovers.” In the end, the poet in Pasolini trumped the anthropologist’s rational stance. Daniels concludes that for a brief time, he was “drawn to the subjective and the emotional ... As the poet draws nearer to another culture, he begins to separate himself from his own culture and his own traditional conceptual framework. The poet begins to feel like an outsider, emotionally distant and experientially distinct from his own culture.” The trip to America provided a good deal of that direction and purpose for Pasolini. He would indeed “throw his body into the struggle.”