

Plato and Mafia Movies

Tom Verso (November 08, 2009)



“...there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry” Plato

Introduction

In an effort to understand conflicting social factions, and how to resolve them into an equitable just society, no thinker exhibited greater objectivity and passion for truth than Plato. For example: One of Western Civilization’s greatest poets; nevertheless, he denied his love of poetry, denied his poetic being, and wrote arguable history’s most negative polemic against poetry’s social worth. So critical of the genera; he argued, in great depth and most vociferously that for moral reasons poetry had no place in an ideal society such as “The Republic.”

Anyone who has reflected on the moral implications of art, getting beyond subjective ‘art for art’s sake’ bohemian clichés, and reflecting on the profound complexity of art’s ideological role in a just society, has to love one of the greatest lines in the history of moral aesthetics: “there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (Republic 607). With that, Plato opens a protracted discussion about the role of poetry in a just society. A discussion every bit as relevant today as in fourth century B.C. Case in point: Mafia genera films from the classic “Godfather” to the current “il Divo”

Definitions

There can be no meaningful discussion about Plato’s poetics and its contemporary relevance unless one understands what Plato meant by ‘philosophy’ and ‘poetry’. As used in the Republic, these terms

definitely do not have the same meaning in today's idiom.

Philosophy

These days, 'philosophy' denotes an academic discipline akin to the "Glass Bead Game" Hesse describe in his novel "Magister Ludi." Played by academicians, philosophy is a game of pure verbal and logical abstractions devoid of empirical content having no relation to material reality and human behavior. The criteria for excellence in the philosopher's game are 'wit' and 'eloquence'. There are no empirical tests of truth or falsity. Empirical material reality is not the object of study in academic philosophy.

'Philosophy' in ancient Greece was quite the opposite. Empirical material reality was the object of knowledge in Greek philosophy. In the evolutionary history of Western thought, Greek reality philosophy subdivided into many disciplines such as metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, etc. In terms of direct influence on our lives, the most important offspring of Greek Philosophy was 'Natural Philosophy'; i.e. the study of nature. Natural philosophy evolved into natural science. Natural science in turn subdivided into the respective scientific disciplines physics, chemistry, astronomy, etc.

By the 19th century, scholars applying the epistemological principles of scientific knowledge to the study of history and contemporary society developed critical historiography (e.g. Ranke) and the social sciences (e.g. Comte).

Accordingly, 'philosophy' in ancient Greece was the epistemological equivalent of 'science' today; i.e. an empirical quest for knowledge of the objective material world governed by the laws of valid logical inference.

Poetry

Poetry, as used in the Republic is not limited, as today, to verse and rhyme schemes such as e.g. Sonnets. Poetry, in the Republic, is a generic term denoting various literary species: lyrical, rhapsodies, odes, rhetoric, etc., and most importantly Homeric epics and Dionysian dramas.

"...the old quarrel..."

Plato's discussion of poetry in the Republic turns on the affects of poetry, in all its various forms, on the citizenship of a State/society and the moral implications of that affect. The discussion is about the role of poetry in molding 'public opinion'. It is essentially a social scientific enquiry. When Socrates say: "there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry", in today's intellectual milieu he means "there is a quarrel between [social science] and [the molders of public opinion]". He is talking about the respective affects of 'philosophy/science' and 'literature/poetry' on 'public opinion', 'human behavior' and the characteristics of the 'State/society'.

In sum: Plato's poetics is not an abstract aesthetics' discussion about eloquence and beauty. It is an empirical inquiry about the affects of poetry on the citizens of a State. Specifically, do the poets, such as Homer and the Tragedians, describe and explain reality accurately (truthfully), or do they use their craft to create illusions with a mind toward affecting an emotional response.

Arguing that poets affect public opinion without knowledge of what they are talking about; Plato writes:

"The [poet] will not be in a state of intelligence about his own creations...And still he will go on without knowing what makes a thing good or bad, and may be expected therefore to imitate only that which appears to be good to the ignorant multitude... (602 emp.+)

Throughout The Republic's discussion of poetry, Plato continually juxtaposes 'knowledge' and 'emotions', and deduces their moral implication and affects on the State. He writes:

"The art of a poet who aims at being popular is not intended to affect rational thinking; he will prefer the passionate and fitful temper, easily imitated, his creations have an inferior degree of truth... he awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason...the poet implants an



EVIL constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature ...he is a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth...poetry has the power of harming even the GOOD [and]...is surely an awful thing." (605 emp.+)

"Poetry is not to be regarded seriously as attaining the truth; and he who listens to her...should be on his guard against her seductions..." (608 emp.+)

Accordingly, Plato concludes, the detrimental affect on the state when the masses are acting on emotions conjured by poets rather than rationally based on knowledge of philosophers, justifies barring poets from the well-ordered State. He writes:

"...we shall be right in refusing to admit them into a well-ordered STATE because they awaken and nourish and strengthen the feelings and impairs the reason ... (605 emp.+)

"If we let the honeyed muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our STATE...(607 emp.+)

In sum: 'the old quarrel' comes down to the following:

Poetry, understood as the literary genera as a whole, uses illusions to conjure public emotions. Emotions conjured by poetic illusions are detrimental to the state.

Philosophy, understood as science, seeks objective knowledge to guide public enlightenment. The state benefits from a populous enlightened by philosophic/scientific knowledge.

Plato today and Mafia movies

Given this understanding of the meaning of 'philosophy' and 'poetry', and their respective affects on society; we can extrapolate the discussion in the Republic to contemporary issues such as the affect of films generally and so-called mafia movies in particular on public opinion. Today's literary critic in the Platonic tradition will ask: "Do the films depict objective reality - truthfully based on objective social scientific knowledge? Or, are they the film-maker/poet's illusions created to affect the emotions of the viewers? Are they a positive or negative contribution to the society as a whole?"

In contemporary Western culture, the generally accepted highest, most reliable, truthful form of knowledge is objective verifiable scientific knowledge. The epistemological essence of that form of knowledge is meticulous observation, measurement and description; coupled with inferences consisted with the rules of logical validity.

Accordingly, if one seeks knowledge, should they go to a theater or to the library? If one wants to understand the nature and causes and effects of organized crime (a.k.a. Mafia) should they watch movies or read social scientists.

Pietro Grasso

A recent interview with Pietro Grasso, antimafia prosecutor and author of "Per non morire di Mafia" (As to not be killed by the Mafia), clearing implies the limitations of film and the need for social scientific knowledge (i-Italy; Leizia Airo Soria, 10/23/09).

Ms. Soria wrote: "[Meeting with] Pietro Grasso...was a unique opportunity to reflect on the reality and complexity of the phenomenon of the Mafia in Italy and throughout the world."

I emphasize "reality and complexity". Again, we must ask ourselves do movies lend themselves to understanding "complex reality."

What is the nature of this 'complex reality'? Mr. Grasso: "[my book] gives voice to delicate but



fundamental aspects regarding the relationship between the Mafia, the economy, politics, and business...one needs the other” More specifically: [Because of] these “connections”, Grasso states “Mafia is a structural phenomenon.”

Grasso, by describing the Mafia as a complex multifaceted structural reality, clearly implies that a 100-minute movie cannot be an affective description let alone an analysis of Mafia reality.

Italian clergy and politicians in Mafia movies

Compare, for example, the depiction of the Italian clergy and Christian Democratic politicians in some Mafia movies with corresponding social scientific descriptions and explanations.

A reoccurring theme in Mafia movies is the criminal corruption of the Italian Catholic clergy by the Mafia. Italian clergymen are depicted in immoral criminal associations and engaged in outright criminal acts with Mafia figures. Is this reality? Can the Italian clergy truthfully be characterized as de facto Mafia operatives?

Similarly, the Christian Democratic Party is characterized in movies as an immoral mafia controlled institution whose sole purpose is to enrich party members and the mafia. Are these characterizations of the Catholic Church and the Christian Democratic Party accurate descriptions of reality? Does criminality effectively explain the behavior of the Italian clergy and politicians?

Note: to characterize is to generalize from a few to the many (i.e. inductive logic). The issue is not if this or that particular clergyman or politician committed a crime. Given that priest and politicians live “East of Eden”, as prone to sin as the rest of humanity, it is reasonable to expect that some would succumb to Mafia and other temptations. But, movie-maker/poets leave the impression that the institutions of the Church and the Party as a whole were acting criminally.

Italian clergy and politicians in social science

Social scientists, as opposed to movie-maker/poets, consistent with Grasso’s concept of Mafia structural relationship, present a more complex description of the relationship between the Church, Christian Democratic Party and the Mafia in the post war years; one that is **not criminal** but **anti-communist**.

Jane and Peter Schneider, social scientists par excellence, present in their book “Reversible Destiny: Mafia, Antimafia, and the Struggle for Palermo” an example of the structural complexity of the tripartite relationship between the Church, Mafia, and Christian Democratic Party in the post WW II period.

They point out that: “Italy’s strategic importance to both the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War nurtured two mutually antagonistic political subcultures, one associated with the Communist Party; the other with the Christian Democratic Party, and the Roman Catholic Church [described as] ‘**a wide and apparently bottomless cleavage** unparalleled in Europe’.”(p162)

“For Italy this ideologically driven polarization of politics during the Cold War meant a division between Catholics and Communist. The resulting ‘red-white’ dialectic was nowhere more consequential than in Sicily, where, in the decades after World War II, most antimafia activists were leftists, whereas most Christian Democrats had to live with the appearance, if not the reality, of mafia conditioning.”(p 161)

Interestingly, the same anti-Communist ideology of Poland’s Catholic clergy is often depicted in film and mass media as ‘heroic resistance.’ Indeed, one of Poland’s most heroic anti-Communist Bishops went on to become a beloved and soon to be canonized Pope. Whereas in Sicily, expressions like ‘Mafia Bishop’ are applied to Sicilian anti-communist clerics.

But, there was no “wide and bottomless cleavage” in Poland such as there was in Italy. The Polish



clergy were at the head of a largely unified national population resisting an occupation by an historic enemy; whereas, the Italian Church had to resist a significant component of the Italian population itself.

The Schneiders write:

“In the name of anticommunism, the bishops and their parish priests supported the Christian Democrats, urging parishioners to do the same, and ignoring the mafia's manipulation of those parishioners' votes.” (p. 164)

In short, the tripartite relationship in post war Italian between, the Church, Christian Democrats and the Mafia described by the Schnieders is an example of what I understand Grosso's reference to “understanding the Mafia as a structural phenomenon.” To my mind, movie representations of the motivations and explanations of the behavior of clergy and politicians are misrepresentations of the complex reality. These films do not accurately describe or explain the complex social phenomena they purport to depict. Rather, they are meant to conjure emotions in the audiences consistent with the moviemaker/poet's ideological point of view.

In Conclusion

The purpose of this note has been to point out that Plato's philosophy of literary criticism is still relevant today, especially to students of literature's affect on public opinion and the social worth of literature. They would do well to read *The Republic* and reflect on the power of literature (especially film) to distort reality and affect emotional unthinking behavior in society.

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