

Faced with Crisis. Wittgenstein to Sraffa on the change of form of life.

David Palme

Let's understand crisis as a loss of agreement in form of life, i.e. the loss of certainty about what we do and how we do it. A crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic disrupts our everyday life and changes the continuity of our actions. By dealing with the countermeasures during the pandemic and its consequences in the aftermath, things change. There is a lot of talk about how there will ultimately be no return to normality, but a "new normality" to which we will have to adapt; will "we" be the same as before?

There is a tendency in the German public to claim "we" will learn through the crisis. For example, to put "saving lives" as our highest priority will change several policies in the future, or, that "solidarity" has again become an important force in our society. Conflicting these hopes, another topic discussed was the question whether the strict countermeasures, including to restrict or forbid gatherings of all kind, would turn Germany into an authoritarian state. The answer was: "No, we won't, because we are not like that". On what reservoir of reasons are such claims drawn?

The talk will elaborate on this question in the light of a series of letters between Ludwig Wittgenstein and Piero Sraffa in 1934, one of which was just recently published in the *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* by Moira di Iaco. In it, Wittgenstein tries to clarify some points of a discussion they had whether his home country Austria could become fascist. One could say Wittgenstein fights a view of a triad of "us", "our life" and "crisis", where "us" is based in an unchangeable "reservoir" of a collective "mentality of a people". Instead, Wittgenstein argues that what we call "mentality" is nothing more than a particular sum of phenomena of our life. He compares it with the face of a person—which is sometimes called a "mirror of the soul", however, it is a product of muscle concentration and yet those can be the result of our behavior: When we often yell our face has different wrinkles than when we laugh a lot.

The talk will argue that his argument is in accord with some remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations*, such as §241-2 and the rest of the so-called Private Language Argument.

When we change our everyday life, we change our mentality; not the other way around. The "mentality of a people" is neither fixed nor a pivot of change in a society, even if the change is happening in a sudden and confusing way, like in a crisis. Crisis is not simply something happening to us, but a consequence of what we are doing to ourselves and others: The countermeasures hit different people differently; some businesses go bankrupt, others don't; some people can practice "social distancing", others can't. The disruption of everyday life is not uniform. The integration of different parts of our society with each gets loss, the agreement in form of life ceases. But, Wittgenstein points out: we cannot lose our face, only change it. It thus tells us something about "us" either way. So, whatever we do, it will still be "us", but with a different face. The question is, under which circumstances, will we still be able to look into the mirror? So which face do we want to show, and will it be the true face or a mask?