

AN AGONISTIC CONCEPTION OF THE MUSEUM

Chantal Mouffe

How could cultural and artistic practices play a role in challenging neo-liberalism? This is a disputed issue about which we find very different positions. Some argue that artists and cultural workers cannot play any more a critical role because they have become a necessary part of capitalist production. The production of symbols is now a central goal of capitalism and, through the development of the creative industries, individuals have become totally subjugated to the control of capital. Not only consumers but also cultural producers have been transformed in passive functions of the capitalist system. They are prisoners of the culture industry dominated by the media and entertainments corporations.

Among those who disagree with such a view, there is no consensus when it comes to visualize the types of resistance to which artistic practices could make a decisive contribution and the forms that those resistances should take. One of the main disagreements concerns the spaces in which resistances should be deployed and the type of relation to be established with artistic institutions. Should critical artistic practices engage with museums and other similar institutions with the aim of transforming them or should they desert them altogether?

One position advocates what can be called a strategy of 'withdrawal from institutions'. It claims that under post-fordist conditions, artists working inside existing institutions are totally instrumentalized and that they are bound to contribute to the reproduction of the system. Resistances are still possible however, but they can only be located outside the institutions of the art world which have become complicit with capitalism and cannot provide any more a site for critical artistic practices.

Those who defend such a view usually advocate a conception of radical politics conceived as 'auto-organization of the multitude' influenced by authors like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and formulated in terms of 'Exodus'. This strategy of exodus comes in different versions, depending on how the future of the 'multitude' is envisaged, but they all assert that the traditional structures of power organized around the national state and

representative democracy have become irrelevant and that they will progressively disappear. Any collaboration with the traditional channels of politics like parties and trade unions are to be avoided. The majoritarian model of society, organized around a state needs to be abandoned in favour of another model of organization presented as more universal. It has the form of a unity provided by common places of the mind, cognitive- linguistic habits and the general intellect. The multitude should ignore the existing power structures and concentrate its efforts in constructing alternative social forms outside public institutions and the state power network.

In *Agonistics*¹ I have taken issue with this conception of radical politics and argued in favour of an 'engagement with institutions'. This strategy is informed by a theoretical approach developed in a previous book written jointly with Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*.²

This approach, whose keys concepts are antagonism and hegemony, asserts that addressing the question of 'the political' requires acknowledging the ever present possibility of antagonism, coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the undecidability that pervades every order. This signifies recognizing the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and envisaging every society as the product of a series of practices attempting at establishing order in a context of contingency. Those practices of articulation, through which a certain order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed, we call 'hegemonic practices'. Every order is seen as the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent hegemonic practices. Things could always have been otherwise and every order is therefore predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. It is in that sense that it can be called 'political', since it is the expression of a particular structure of power relations. What is at a given moment considered as the natural order is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices; it is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity exterior to the practices that bring it into being. Every hegemonic order is always susceptible of being challenged by 'counter-hegemonic' practices, i.e practices which attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony.

Such an approach permits us to grasp the complexity of the forces at play in the emergence of the current neo-liberal hegemony, thereby allowing us to understand how to develop a counter-hegemonic offensive. It shows how this hegemony is the result of a set of political interventions in a complex field of

¹ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically*, Verso 2013, Chapter 4

² Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso. Second Edition 2001

economic, legal and ideological forces. It is a discursive construction that articulates in a very specific manner a manifold of practices, discourses and languages-games of a very different nature. Through a process of sedimentation, the political origin of those contingent practices has been erased and they have become naturalized. Neo-liberal practices and institutions can therefore appear as the outcome of natural processes, and the forms of identifications that they have produced have crystallized in identities which are taken for granted. This is how the view of the world, which provides the framework for what most people currently perceive as possible and desirable, has been established. To challenge neo-liberalism it is therefore vital to transform this framework, and this is precisely what the hegemonic struggle should be about.

By bringing to the fore the discursive character of the social, and the multiplicity of discursive practices through which 'our world' is constructed, the hegemonic approach is particularly fruitful when it comes to apprehending the relations between art and politics. It highlights the fact that the construction of an hegemony is not limited to the traditional political institutions but that it also takes place in the multiplicity of places of what is usually called 'civil society'. This is where, as Antonio Gramsci has shown, a particular conception of the world is established and a specific understanding of reality is defined, what he refers to as the 'common sense', providing the terrain in which specific forms of subjectivity are constructed. And he indicated that the domain of culture plays a crucial role because this is one of the terrains where the 'common sense' is built and subjectivities are constructed.

Acknowledging the centrality of the cultural terrain in the hegemonic construction of the common sense is crucial because it reveals how cultural and artistic practices could contribute to the counter-hegemonic struggle. Before addressing this question, I should clarify that the hegemonic approach does not envisage the relation between art and politics in terms of two separately constituted fields, art on one side and politics on the other, between which a relation would need to be established. As I have repeatedly emphasized, there is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art. Indeed from the point of view of the theory of hegemony, artistic practices play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order or in its challenging, and this is why they necessarily have a political dimension. The political, for its part, concerns the symbolic ordering of social relations and this is where its aesthetic dimension resides. This is why I do not think that it is appropriate to make a distinction between art that is 'political' and art that would supposedly be 'non-political'. The difference should better be expressed in terms of critical art.

Critical artistic practices are those which, in a variety of ways, contribute to unsettling the dominant hegemony and play a part in the process of disarticulation/rearticulation that cha-

acterizes a counter-hegemonic politics. This counter-hegemonic politics aims at targeting the institutions which secure the dominant hegemony so as to bring about profound transformations in the way they function. This strategy of 'war of position' (Gramsci) is composed of a diversity of practices and interventions operating in a multiplicity of spaces: economic, legal, political and cultural. In the present conjuncture, with the decisive role played by the culture industries in the capitalist process of reproduction, the cultural and artistic terrain has become of an ever greater strategic importance because artistic and cultural production is currently vital for capital valorization. This is due to the increasing reliance of post-fordist capitalism on semiotic techniques in order to create the modes of subjectivation which are necessary for its reproduction. As Foucault pointed out, in modern production, the control of the souls is crucial in governing affects and passions because the forms of exploitation characteristic of the times, when manual labor was dominant have been replaced by new one, which constantly call for the creation of new needs and incessant desires for the acquisition of goods. To maintain its hegemony, the capitalist system needs to permanently mobilize people's desires and shape their identities and the cultural terrain. With its various institutions it occupies a key position in this process. This is why the hegemonic perspective asserts that it is not by deserting the institutional terrain that critical artistic practices can contribute to the counter-hegemonic struggle but by engaging with it, with the aim of fostering dissent. What is at stake in this struggle is the construction of a multiplicity of what I call 'agonistic' spaces, where the dominant consensus is subverted and where new modes of identification are made available.

Since the fostering of agonistic public spaces constitutes a key dimension of the counter-hegemonic struggle, it is important to explain that, by agonistic public spaces, I mean public spaces where conflicting points of view are confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation. Such an agonistic view challenges the widespread conception of the public space, which is conceived as the terrain, where one should aim at creating consensus. It is therefore very different from the conception defended by Jürgen Habermas, who presents what he calls the 'public sphere', as the place where deliberation aiming at a rational consensus takes place. To be sure, Habermas now accepts that it is improbable, given the limitations of social life, that such a consensus could effectively be reached and he sees his 'ideal situation of communication' as a 'regulative idea'. However, from the perspective of the hegemonic approach, the impediments to the habermasian ideal speech situation are not empirical but ontological. Indeed, one of its main tenets is that such a rational consensus is a conceptual impossibility because it presupposes the availability of a consensus without exclusion, which is precisely what the hegemonic approach reveals to be impossible.

I would like to specify that we are never dealing with one single space. As I understand it, the agonistic confrontation takes place in a multiplicity of discursive surfaces and public spaces are always plural. I should also insist on a second important point. While there is no underlying principle of unity, no pre-determined centre to this diversity of spaces, there exist diverse forms of articulation among them and we are never confronted with the kind of dispersion envisaged by some postmodernist thinkers. Nor are we faced with the kind of 'smooth' space found in Deleuze and his followers. Public spaces are always striated and hegemonically structured. A given hegemony results from a specific articulation of a diversity of spaces and the hegemonic struggle also consists in an attempt to create a different form of articulation among public spaces.

It should be clear by now that those, who foster the creation of agonistic public spaces, visualize the role of artistic practices in a very different way than those, whose objective is the creation of consensus. Critical art, for them, is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at bringing to the fore the existence of alternatives to the current post-political order. Its critical dimension consists in making visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate, in giving a voice to those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony. I would like to stress that, according to such a perspective, critical artistic practices do not try to lift a supposedly false consciousness, so as to reveal the 'true reality'. This would be completely at odds with the anti-essentialist premises of the theory of hegemony which rejects the very idea of a 'true consciousness'. It is always through insertion in a manifold of practices, discourses and languages games that specific forms of individualities are constructed. The transformation of political identities can never be the result of a rationalist appeal to the true interest of the subject. It consists in the inscription of the social agent in practices, that will mobilize its affects in a way, that disarticulates the framework, in which the dominant process of identification is taking place, so as to bring about other forms of identification. This means that to construct oppositional identities, it is not enough to simply foster a process of 'de-identification', a second move is necessary. To insist only on the first move, is in fact to remain trapped in a problematic, according to which the negative moment would be sufficient on its own, to bring about something positive. As if new subjectivities were already available, ready to emerge, when the weight of the dominant ideology would have been lifted. Such a view, which informs many forms of critical art, fails to come to terms with the nature of the hegemonic struggle and the complex process of construction of identities.

How to visualize the role of the museum within such a framework? Could it contribute to the agonistic struggle by undermining the imaginary environment of the consumer society? My view is that, far from being seen as conservative institutions,

impervious to change and dedicated to the maintenance and reproduction of the existing hegemony, museums and art institutions could become agonistic public spaces where this hegemony is openly contested. To be sure, the history of the museum has been linked since its beginning to the construction of bourgeois hegemony, but this function can be altered. As Wittgenstein has taught us, signification is always dependent on context, and it is use, which determines meaning. This is also true for institutions, and we should discard the essentialist idea that some institutions are by essence destined to fulfill one immutable function. In fact we have already witnessed how, following the neo-liberal trend, many museums have abandoned their original function of educating citizens into the dominant culture and have been reduced to sites of entertainment for a public of consumers. The main objective of those 'post-modern' museums is to make money through blockbuster exhibitions and the sale of a manifold of products for tourists. The type of 'participation' that they promote is based on consumerism and they are actively contributing to the commercialization and depoliticization of the cultural field.

However this neo-liberal turn is not the only possible form of evolution and another one can be envisaged, leading in a progressive direction. There might have been a time when it made sense to abandon the museums to open new avenues for artistic practices. But in the present conditions, with the art world almost totally colonized by the markets, museums could be seen as privileged places for escaping from the dominance of the market. Boris Groys for instance has argued that the museum, which has been stripped of its normative role, could provide a privileged place for artworks to be presented in a context, that allows them to be distinguished from commercial products.³ Visualized in such a way, the museum would offer a place for resisting the effects of the growing commercialization of art, and for countering the dictatorship of the global media market.

But from the hegemonic perspective we could also rethink the function of the museum in a different way. Once it is accepted that instead of celebrating the destruction of all institutions, as a move towards liberation, the task for radical politics, is to engage with them, developing their progressive potential. We could envisage the possibility of transforming museums into agonistic public spaces and of converting them into sites of opposition to neo-liberal hegemony. In fact, several experiences are already offering examples of the strategy of 'engagement with', that I am advocating. One of the earlier one was the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), which under the direction of Manuel Borja-Villel succeeded in creating a new model of museums.⁴ Between 2000 and 2008 various projects informed by critical pedagogy were launched to recover the

³ Boris Groys, 'The Logic of Aesthetic Rights' in *Art Power*, MIT Press, 2008

⁴ An overview of the activities of the MACBA is found in "Experiments in a New Institutionality" by Jorge Ribalta in *Relational Objects*, MACBA Collections 2002-2007, MACBA Publications 2010

educational role of the museum and its role as a constituent part of the public sphere. With the aim of proposing an alternative reading of modern art, the MACBA started to develop a Collection and organize temporary exhibitions, privileging artists and art scenes which had been neglected by the dominant discourse on artistic modernity. Another of its objectives was to establish a vibrant relation between the museum and the city and to provide a space for debate and the expression of conflicts. Looking for ways in which art could make a significant contribution to a multiplication of public spheres, it encouraged contacts between different social movements. For example, *The Direkt Action* as one of the Fine Arts workshops organized in 2002, brought together artist collectives and social movements to examine possible forms of connecting local political struggles with artistic practices. Several workshops were organized around topics such as precarious labor, borders and migrations, gentrification, new media and emancipatory policies. A further example of collaboration with the new social movements was the project, *How do we want to be governed*, conceived as a counter-model to the 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures launched by the City Council of Barcelona. While taking culture as an alibi, the real objective of this forum was a real estate operation to promote the urban renewal of the seafront of the city. Curated by Roger M. Buerger, the *How do you want to be governed?* exhibition took place in several areas of the site to be remodeled. It was an exhibition in process, combining artistic work and social dynamics, and involving debates with the neighborhood movements.

The MACBA has been a pioneer in promoting a radical alternative to the modern and the post-modern museum but it not the only one and other museums have followed similar patterns. Several of them, the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, the MACBA; in Barcelona, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the MUHKA in Antwerp, SALT in Istanbul and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, have now joined forces in establishing a network called *L'internationale*. At the origin of this project is the conviction, shared by the directors of those museums, that in order to fight the privatization of culture and to defend the idea of a public service, it is necessary to think about art differently and to relinquish the idea that the museums should treat the works in their collections as their own private property. In their view, time has come to substitute the notion of property for that of custody, and to assert that what is important is not to own artworks but to have access to them, even temporarily. Their belief in the need to develop new institutional models, going beyond exclusive ownership, prompted them to establish modes of long-term collaboration in order to collectively use their collections and archives.

An important objective of *L'internationale* is to challenge the dominant narratives in the art world and to build a new plural narrative. With this aim, it proposes collaboration between museums, each with its specific collection focus, and history, so

as to instigate transnational, plural cultural narratives. It is in that spirit that the director of the Moderna Galerija, Zdenka Badovinac has pursued a very interesting strategy of drawing attention to the differences between Eastern and Western social realities, highlighting the differences between the neo-avant-garde movements in the two regions. She defends the idea that a museum of contemporary art should not cover up antagonisms under a pluralism of pure diversity but underlines them. It must put forward the formation of a parallel narrative and create the foundations for the reception of art in very different contexts. To that effect, she has put together a number of projects connected with the Balkan and more generally Eastern Europe. The intention is to offer more possibilities for local institutions to produce knowledge about their own history, and then, indirectly, in the global art system.

A similar focus on the production of local knowledge is present in the other institutions of *L'internationale*. They all insist on the importance for the museum of playing a specific role in the place, where they are located and of establishing a critical dialogue with the local culture. The purpose of the new model of the museum that they are advocating, is to create a critical public space, capable of bringing about a democratic culture that will empower the citizens. They believe that this can only be done by establishing a dynamic relation with the territory where the museum is located and its particular memory, acknowledging the power relations through which this territory is structured. This is according to them the precondition for creating a relation with the public that will activate their critical capacities. Another requirement is providing citizens with the tools that will allow them to exercise those capacities. This is how the educational function of the museum should be conceived.

The following example gives, I think, a good illustration of this point. When he became the director of the Museo Reina Sofia in 2008, Manuel Borja Villeda took a bold step. He decided to change the display of *Guernica* that had been put behind a big glass case in a huge, isolated room and to place it in the socio-political and cultural context in which it was made: the Spanish pavilion for the International Exposition held in Paris in 1937. The work had been commissioned to Picasso by the Spanish Republican government in the midst of the civil war. The new exhibition display at the Reina Sofia recreates the original context, by bringing together the work of other artists commissioned alongside Picasso, like Alexander Calder, Joan Miro and Julio Gonzalez, as well as an architectonic maquette of the pavillon, and photographic and filmic documents, supporting the cause of the Republican government. Being replaced in its original setting of an anti-fascist protest, Picasso's masterpiece is now able to establish a very different relation with the public. This shows how a museum can play an important educational role by empowering the public through the activation of its critical capacities.

To envisage the museum in an agonistic way, it is necessary to acknowledge that what is at stake in cultural institutions, is an hegemonic struggle about the definition of the common sense, and the construction of the social imaginary. Museums and public institutions are places where a struggle takes place between conflicting representations of history, and the way society should be organized. Instead of being denied on the ground that the public space is the place where one should search for consensus, this conflictual dimension needs to be recognized and activated. In that way museums would be transformed into agonistic public spaces, that facilitate the expression of dissent, thereby helping people to better understand the world in which they are living, and allowing them to see things from different points of view. By providing people with a different kind of experience than the one they find in their role as consumers, museums and cultural institutions can make them aware that aesthetic experience cannot be reduced to the mere act of consuming. They can become spaces of resistance to the process of commodification of culture brought about by the development of cultural industries. By fostering a manifold of practices to develop the critical capacities of the citizens, museums and cultural institutions could play a decisive role in the struggle for the radicalization of democracy.