Art and Democracy
Art as an Agonistic Intervention in Public Space

Chantal Mouffe

Essay – January 1, 2007

The Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe defines the public space as a battleground on which different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation. According to Mouffe, critical artistic practices can play an important role in subverting the dominant hegemony in this so-called 'agonistic' model of public space, visualizing that which is repressed and destroyed by the consensus of post-political democracy.

Can artistic practices still play a critical role in a society where the difference between art and advertising have become blurred and where artists and cultural workers have become a necessary part of capitalist production? Scrutinizing the 'new spirit of capitalism', Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have shown how the demands for autonomy of the new movements of the 1960s had been harnessed in the development of the post-Fordist networked economy and transformed into new forms of control.[1] The aesthetic strategies of the counterculture: the search for authenticity, the ideal of self-management, the anti-hierarchical exigency, are now used in order to promote the conditions required by the current mode of capitalist regulation, replacing the disciplinary framework characteristic of the Fordist period. Nowadays, artistic and cultural production play a central role in the process of capital valorisation and, through 'neo-management', artistic critique has become an important element of capitalist productivity.

This has led some people to claim that art had lost its critical power because any form of critique is automatically recuperated and neutralized by capitalism. Others, however, offer a different view and see the new situation as opening the way for different strategies of opposition. Such a view is supported by insights from Andre Gorz: 'When self-exploitation acquires a central role in the process of valorisation, the production of subjectivity becomes a terrain of the central conflict . . . Social relations that elude the grasp of value, competitive individualism and market exchange make the latter appear by contrast in their political dimension, as extensions of the power of capital. A front of total resistance to this power is made possible. It necessarily overflows the terrain of production of knowledge towards new practices of living, consuming and collective appropriation of common spaces and everyday culture. [2] Certainly, the modernist idea of the avant-garde has to be abandoned, but that does not mean that any form of critique has become impossible. What is needed to widen the field of artistic intervention, by intervening directly in a multiplicity of social spaces in order to oppose the programme of total social mobilization of capitalism. The objective should be to undermine the imaginary environment necessary for its reproduction. As Brian Holmes puts it: 'Art can offer a chance for society to collectively reflect on the imaginary figures it depends upon for its very consistency, its self-understanding. [3]

I personally think that artistic practices can play a role in the struggle against capitalist

domination, but to envisage how an effective intervention can be made requires understanding of the dynamics of democratic politics; an understanding which I contend can only be obtained by acknowledging the political in its antagonistic dimension as well as the contingent nature of any type of social order. It is only within such a perspective that one can grasp the hegemonic struggle which characterizes democratic politics, the hegemonic struggle in which artistic practices can play a crucial role.

The Political as Antagonism

The point of departure of the theoretical reflections that I am going to present is the difficulty that we currently have in our post-political age for envisaging the problems facing our societies in a *political* way. Contrary to what neoliberal ideologists would like us to believe, political questions are not mere technical issues to be solved by experts. Properly political questions always involve decisions which require making a choice between conflicting alternatives. This incapacity to think politically is to a great extent due to the uncontested hegemony of liberalism. Let me specify in order to avoid any misunderstanding that 'liberalism', in the way I use the term in the present context, refers to a philosophical discourse with many variants, united not by a common essence but by a multiplicity of what Wittgenstein calls 'family resemblances'. There are many liberalisms, some more progressive than others, but save a few exceptions, the dominant tendency in liberal thought is characterized by a rationalist and individualist approach which is unable to adequately grasp the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails; conflicts for which no rational solution could ever exist, hence the dimension of antagonism that characterizes human societies. The typical liberal understanding of pluralism is that we live in a world in which there are indeed many perspectives and values and that, due to empirical limitations, we will never be able to adopt them all, but that, when put together, they constitute an harmonious ensemble. This is why this type of liberalism must negate the political in its antagonistic dimension and is thereby unable to grasp the challenge facing democratic politics. Indeed, one of the main tenets of this liberalism is the rationalist belief in the availability of a universal consensus based on reason. No wonder that the political constitutes its blind spot. Liberalism has to negate antagonism since, by bringing to the fore the inescapable moment of decision – in the strong sense of having to decide in an undecidable terrain – antagonism reveals the very limit of any rational consensus.

Politics as Hegemony

Next to antagonism, the concept of hegemony is, in my approach, the other key notion for addressing the question of 'the political'. To acknowledge the dimension of 'the political' as the ever-present possibility of antagonism requires coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the undecidability which pervades every order. In other words, it requires the recognition of the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices that attempt to establish order in a context of contingency. The political is linked to the acts of hegemonic institution. It is in this sense that one has to differentiate the social from the political. The social is the realm of sedimented practices, that is, practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and which are taken for granted, as if they were self-grounded. Sedimented social practices are a constitutive part of any possible society; not all social bonds are questioned at the same time. The social and the political thus have the status of what Heidegger called ***existentials***, or the necessary dimensions of any societal life. The political – understood in its hegemonic sense – involves the visibility of the acts of social institution. This reveals that society is not to be seen as the unfolding of a logic exterior to itself, whatever the source of this logic might be: forces of production, development of the Spirit, laws of history, etcetera. Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. The frontier between the social and the political is essentially unstable and requires constant displacements and renegotiations

between social agents. Things could always be otherwise and therefore every order is 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. Power is therefore constitutive of the social because the social could not exist without the power relations through which it is given shape. What is at a given moment considered to be the 'natural' order – together with the 'common sense' that accompanies it – is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices; it is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity outside the practices that bring it into being.

Every order is therefore political and based on some form of exclusion. There are always other possibilities that have been repressed and that can be reactivated. The articulatory practices through which a certain order is established and the meaning of social institutions is fixed are 'hegemonic practices'. Every hegemonic order is susceptible to being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices – practices that will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony.

Once those theoretical points have been acknowledged, it is possible to understand the nature of what I call the 'agonistic' struggle, which I see as the core of a vibrant democracy. [4] What is at stake in the agonistic struggle is the very configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured. It is a struggle between opposing hegemonic projects which can never be reconciled rationally. An agonistic conception of democracy requires coming to terms with the contingent character of the hegemonic politicoeconomic articulations which determine the specific configuration of a society at a given moment. They are precarious and pragmatic constructions which can be disarticulated and transformed as a result of the agonistic struggle among the adversaries. Contrary to the various liberal models, the agonistic approach that I am advocating recognizes that society is always politically instituted and never forgets that the terrain in which hegemonic interventions take place is always the outcome of previous hegemonic practices and that it is never a neutral one. This is why it denies the possibility of a non-adversarial democratic politics and criticizes those who, by ignoring the dimension of 'the political', reduce politics to a set of supposedly technical moves and neutral procedures.

The Public Space

To bring to the fore the relevance of the agonistic model of democratic politics for artistic practices, I want to examine its consequences for visualizing the public space. The most important consequence is that it challenges the widespread conception that, albeit in different ways, informs most visions of the public space, conceived as the terrain where consensus can emerge. For the agonistic model, on the contrary, the public space is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation. I have spoken so far of the public space, but I need to specify straight away that we are not dealing here with one single space. According to the agonistic approach, public spaces are always plural and the agonistic confrontation takes place on a multiplicity of discursive surfaces. I also want to insist on a second important point. While there is no underlying principle of unity, no predetermined centre to this diversity of spaces, diverse forms of articulation always exist among them and we are not faced with the kind of dispersion envisaged by some postmodernist thinkers. Nor are we dealing 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 this means that the hegemonic struggle also consists of the attempt to create a different form of articulation among public spaces.

My approach is therefore clearly very different from the one defended by Jürgen Habermas, who, when he envisages the political public space (which he calls the 'public sphere'), presents it as the place where deliberation aimed 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, according to the perspective that I am advocating, the impediments to the Habermasian ideal speech situation are not empirical but ontological and the rational consensus that he presents as a regulative idea is in fact a conceptual impossibility. Indeed, this would require the availability of a consensus without exclusion, which is precisely what the agonistic approach reveals to be impossible.

I also want indicate that, despite the similar terminology, my conception of the agonistic public space also differs from that of Hannah Arendt, which has become so popular recently. In my view the main problem with the Arendtian understanding of 'agonism', is, to put it in a nutshell, that it is an 'agonism without antagonism'. What I mean is that, while Arendt puts great emphasis on human plurality and insists that politics deals with the community and reciprocity of human beings which are different, she never acknowledges that this plurality is at the origin of antagonistic conflicts. According to her to think politically is to develop the ability to see things from a multiplicity of perspectives. As her reference to Kant and his idea of 'enlarged thought' testifies, her pluralism is not fundamentally different from the liberal one, because it is inscribed in the horizon of an inter-subjective agreement. Indeed, what she looks for in Kant's doctrine of the aesthetic judgment is a procedure for ascertaining inter-subjective agreement in the public space. Despite significant differences between their respective approaches, Arendt, like Habermas, ends up envisaging the public space in a consensual way. It is true, as Linda Zerilli has pointed out, that in her case the consensus results from the exchange of voices and opinions (in the Greek sense of *doxa*) not from a rational *Diskurs* like in Habermas. [5] While for Habermas consensus emerges through what Kant calls *disputieren*, an exchange of arguments constrained by logical rules, for Arendt it is a question of *streiten*, where agreement is produced through persuasion, not irrefutable proofs. However, neither of them is able to acknowledge the hegemonic nature of every form of consensus and the ineradicability of antagonism, the moment of *Wiederstreit*, what Lyotard refers to as 'the differend'. It is symptomatic that, despite finding their inspiration in different aspects of Kant's philosophy, both Arendt and Habermas have in common that they privilege the aspect of the beautiful in Kant's aesthetic and ignore his reflection on the sublime. This is no doubt related to their avoidance of 'the differend'.

Critical Artistic Practices and Hegemony

We are now in a condition to understand the relevance of the hegemonic conception of politics for the field of artistic practices. However, before addressing this question, I would like to stress that according to the approach I am advocating, one should not see 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. There is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art. This is why I have argued that it is not useful to make a distinction between political and non-political art. 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, what Claude Lefort calls 'the mise en scène', 'the mise en forme' of human coexistence and this is where lies its aesthetic dimension.

The real issue concerns the possible forms of *critical* art, the different ways in which artistic practices can contribute to questioning the dominant hegemony. Once we accept that identities are never pre-given but that they are always the result of processes of identification, that they are discursively constructed, the question that arises is the type of identity that critical artistic practices should aim at fostering. Clearly those who advocate

the creation of agonistic public spaces, where the objective is to unveil all that is repressed by the dominant consensus, are going to envisage the relation between artistic practices and their public in a very different way than those whose objective is the creation of consensus, even if this consensus is seen as a critical one. According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.

In my view, this agonistic approach is particularly suited to grasp the nature of the new forms of artistic activism that have emerged recently and that, in a great variety of ways, aim at challenging the existing consensus. Those artistico-activist practices are of very different types, from a variety of new urban struggles like 'Reclaim the Streets' in Britain or the 'Tute Bianche' in Italy to the 'Stop Advertising' campaigns in France and the 'Nike Ground-Rethinking Space' in Austria. We can find another example in the strategy of 'identity correction' of the Yes Men who appearing under different identities – for instance as representatives of the World Trade Organization – develop a very effective satire of neoliberal ideology. [6] Their aim is to target institutions fostering neoliberalism at the expense of people's wellbeing and to assume their identities in order to offer correctives. For instance the following text appeared in 1999 in a parody of the wto website: 'The World Trade Organization is a giant international bureaucracy whose goal is to help businesses by enforcing 'free trade': the freedom of transnationals to do business however they see fit. The wto places this freedom above all other freedoms, including the freedom to eat, drink water, not eat certain things, treat the sick, protect the environment, grow your own crops, organize a trade union, maintain social services, govern, have a foreign policy. Al those freedoms are under attack by huge corporations working under the veil of "free trade", that mysterious right that we are told must trump all others.[7] Some people mistook this false website for the real one and the Yes Men even managed to appear as wto representatives in several international conferences where one of their satirical interventions consisted of proposing a telematic worker-surveillance device in the shape of a yard-long golden phallus.

Of course those forms of artistic activism represent only one possible form of political intervention for artists and there are many other ways in which artists can play a critical role. Following Richard Noble we can distinguish four distinct ways of making critical art. There is the kind of work that more or less directly engages critically with political reality, such as that of Barbara Kruger, Hans Haacke or Santiago Sierra. Then there are artworks exploring subject positions or identities defined by otherness, marginality, oppression or victimization. This has been the dominant mode of making critical art in recent years: feminist art, queer art, art made by ethnic or religious minorities. But one should also include here the work of Kryzstof Wodiczko. Thirdly, there is the type of critical art which investigates its own political condition of production and circulation such as that of Andrea Fraser, Christian Phillipp Mueller or Mark Dion. We can also distinguish art as utopian experimentation, attempts to imagine alternative ways of living: societies or communities built around values in opposition to the ethos of late capitalism. Here we find for instance the names of Thomas Hirschhorn (*Bataille Monument*), Jeremy Deller (*Battle of Orgreaves*) or Antony Gormley (*Asian Field*). [8]

What makes all of these very diverse artistic practices critical ones is that, albeit in different ways, they can be seen as agonistic interventions in the public space. To be sure, their aim is not making a total break with the existing state of affairs in order to create something absolutely new. Today artists can no longer pretend to constitute an avant-garde offering a radical critique, but this is not a reason to proclaim that their political role has ended. What needs to be relinquished is precisely the idea that to be political means to offer such a radical critique. This is why some people claim that today it is not possible

any more for art to play a critical role because it is always recuperated and neutralized. We find a similar mistake among those who believe that radicality means transgression and that the more transgressive practices are the more radical they are. Then when they realize that there is no transgression that cannot be recuperated, they also conclude that art can no longer play a critical political role. There are also those who envisage critical art in moralistic terms and see its role as one of moral condemnation. In fact, given that we find ourselves today in what Danto calls the 'condition of pluralism', lacking generally agreed criteria by which to judge art productions, there is a marked tendency to replace aesthetic judgments by moral ones, pretending that those moral judgments are also political ones. In my view all those approaches are in fact anti-political because they are unable to grasp the specificity of the political. On the contrary, once political struggle is envisaged according to the hegemonic approach that I have been delineating it becomes possible to understand the crucial place of the cultural dimension in the establishment of a hegemony and to see why artists can play an important role in subverting the dominant hegemony. In our post-democracies where a post-political consensus is being celebrated as a great advance for democracy, critical artistic practices can disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread, bringing to the fore its repressive character. And, in many ways, they can also contribute to the construction of new subjectivities. This is why I see them as a crucial dimension of the radical democratic project.

Chantal Mouffe is Professor of Political Theory at the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster in London. She has taught and researched in many universities in Europe, North America and South America and she is a corresponding member of the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris. She is the editor of *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1979), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy. Pluralism, Citizenship, Community* (Verso, London, 1992), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (Routledge, 1996) and *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (Verso, London, 1999), the co-author with Ernesto Laclau of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso, London, 1985) and the author of *The Return of the Political* (Verso, London, 1993), *The Democratic Paradox* (Verso, London, 2000) and *On the Political* (Routledge, London, 2005). See further: www.westminster.ac.uk.

Footnotes

1. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).
2. Interview with André Gorz, *Multitudes*, No. 15 (2004), 209.
3. Brian Holmes, 'Artistic Autonomy', www.u-tangente.org.
4. For a development of this 'agonistic' approach, see Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), chapter 4.
5. Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), chapter 4.
6. See for instance their book *The Yes Men. The True Story of the End of the World Trade Organization* published by The Disinformation Company Ltd, 2004.
7. Theyesmen Group website, www. theyesmen.org.
8. Richard Noble, 'Some Provisional Remarks on Art and Politics', in: *The Showroom Annual 2003/2004*.

Tags

Art Discourse, Democracy, Public Space, Capitalism

This text was downloaded on April 27, 2024 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
onlineopen.org/art-and-democracy