

Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art

Chantal Mouffe

Can designerly and 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? In her essay on artistic activism and agonistic spaces Chantal Mouffe discusses several perspectives on the relation(s) between art and politics in terms of two separately constituted fields: the aesthetic dimensions in the political, and the political dimensions in art. Mouffe pleads for artists (and designers) to take up strategies of engagement to challenge the dominant neo-liberal consensus. Chantal Mouffe has made significant contributions to the field of political science and theory, particularly in her work on the concept of the "agonistic". Her insights into the nature of political conflict and the role it plays in shaping democratic societies have challenged conventional wisdom and inspired new ways of thinking about power and politics. As one of the most influential political theorists of our time, she celebrates her 80th birthday today. We congratulate and are pleased to republish her article "Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art". Tom Bieling

How to envisage artistic strategies in politics and political strategies in art? This is the question that a variety of artists, theorists and activists had been addressing during the 24/7 discourse camp organized in the context of the 2012 Steirischer Herbst. It is clear that posing such a question supposes discarding the view that artists and cultural workers cannot play any more a critical role in society because they have become a necessary part of capitalist production. According to such a view 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. Were this to be true, there would of course be no point in examining the possible modalities of aesthetic resistance.

I think that we can therefore take for granted that the participants in this marathon would reject this pessimistic diagnostic. It is likely that most of them, while acknowledging the profound transformations brought about by the current post-fordist stage of capitalism, will argue that those new forms of production allow for novel types of resistances to which artistic practices could make a decisive contribution. It is when it comes to envisaging the forms that those resistances should take that we will find important divergences. To examine the nature of those divergences could therefore help us to clarify the stakes of our encounter.

I think that one of the main disagreements that we will face concerns the spaces in which resistances should be deployed and the type of relation to be established with the institutions. Should critical artistic practices engage with current institutions with the aim of transforming them or should they desert them altogether? An influential approach advocates what can be called a strategy of 'withdrawal'. It claims that the institutions of the art world have become complicit with capitalism and that they cannot provide any more a site for critical artistic practices. Under post-fordist conditions, artists working inside the system are totally instrumentalized and, transformed into businessmen; they are bound to contribute to the reproduction of the system. Resistances are still possible, but they can only be located outside the institutions.

It is interesting to note that this position, which is characteristic of a variety of people influenced by the Autonomist tradition, acknowledges the growth of the culture industry already pointed out by Adorno and Horkheimer, but interprets it in a very different way. As is well known, Adorno and Horkheimer saw the development of the culture industry as the moment when the fordist mode of production finally managed to enter the field of culture. For them this evolution represented a further stage in the commodification and subjugation of society to the requisites of capitalist production. Adorno saw art as the only place where autonomy was still possible. It is this possibility that the pessimistic view mentioned at the beginning declares has having now been eliminated by the advances of the commodification process.

Post-operaist theorists, for their part, see the transition from fordism to post-fordism in a very different way. Paolo Virno for instance, asserts that culture industries have played an important role in the process of transition between fordism and post-fordism (Virno 2004). It is where new practices of productions emerged which led to the overcoming of fordism. They represent, he says, the matrix of post-fordism. Indeed, with the development of immaterial labour in advanced capitalism, the labour process has become performative and it mobilizes the most universal requisites of the species: perception, language, memory and feelings. Contemporary production is now 'virtuosic' and productive labor in its totality appropriates the special characteristics of the performing artist. This transformation opens the way for new forms of social relations in which art and work exist in new configurations. Under post-fordist conditions, the objective of critical artistic practices should be to contribute to the development of the new social relations which are made possible by the transformation of the work process. Their main task is the production of new subjectivities and the elaboration of new worlds that would create the conditions for the self-organization of the multitude.

Such a view of the role of artistic practices goes together with a conception of radical politics formulated in terms of 'exodus'. This strategy of exodus comes in different versions, according to way 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 today become irrelevant and that they will progressively disappear. Hence the belief that the multitude can ignore the existing power structures and concentrate its efforts in constructing alternative social forms outside the

state power network. 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.

Next to this strategy of 'withdrawal from institutions', there is another strategy which is the one that I want to advocate, a strategy of 'engagement with institutions'. This strategy is informed by a theoretical approach that brings to the fore the discursive character of the social and reveals how it is through a multiplicity of discursive practices that 'our world' is constructed, a construction that is always the result of a particular hegemony.¹ This theoretical approach reveals that society is always politically instituted and that what is called 'the social' is the realm of sedimented political practices, practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution. As the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices, every order is the expression of a particular structure of power relations. What is at a given moment accepted as the 'natural order' is always the result of sedimented hegemonic practices. Things could always have been otherwise and every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. This is why it is always susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices that will attempt to disarticulate it so as to establish a different hegemony.

I submit that this approach is particularly fruitful to apprehend the relations between art and politics and for visualizing artistic strategies in politics and political strategies in art because it highlights the fact that the hegemonic confrontation is not limited to the traditional political institutions but that it also takes place in the multiplicity of places where hegemony is constructed, i.e the domain of what is usually called 'civil society'. This is where, as Antonio Gramsci has argued, 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. Gramsci also emphasized the centrality of cultural and artistic practices in the formation and diffusion of this 'common

¹ For a presentation of this approach, see for instance: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Laclau/Mouffe 2001).

sense', highlighting the decisive role played by those practices in the reproduction or disarticulation of a given hegemony.

From the standpoint of the hegemonic approach, artistic practices have a necessary relation to politics because they either contribute to the reproduction of the 'common sense' that secures a given hegemony or to its challenging. Critical artistic practices are those that, in a variety of ways, play a part in the process of disarticulation/rearticulation which characterizes a counter-hegemonic politics. This counter-hegemonic politics aims at targeting the institutions which secure the dominant hegemony in order 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. The domain of culture plays a crucial role in this war of position because, as we have seen, this is one of the terrains where the 'common sense' is built and subjectivities are constructed. 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 strategic importance. Artistic and cultural production is indeed 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. The forms of exploitation characteristic of the times when manual labor was dominant have been replaced by new ones 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, occupies a key position in this process. We find here a very different strategy to the one of 'withdrawal from institutions' advocated by the first conception that we examined.

Critical artistic practices do not contribute to the counter-hegemonic struggle by deserting the institutional terrain but by engaging with it, with the aim of fostering dissent and creating a multiplicity of agonistic spaces where the dominant consensus is challenged and where new modes of identification are made available.

I want to make clear that I am not arguing here in favour of a purely institutional conception of politics or for a relegation of critical artistic

practices to the traditional domain of the art world, but for an articulation of different modes of intervention in a multiplicity of places. There exists a great variety of ways of bringing about agonistic spaces and they can emerge both inside and outside institutions. The hegemonic approach envisages radical politics as an articulation of parliamentary with extra-parliamentary struggles and aims at establishing a synergy between parties and social movements. In the specific domain of artistic practices, such an approach encourages a diversity of interventions, inside and outside the traditional world of art. Challenging the view that institutions cannot be transformed and that resistances can only develop and be successful outside them, it stresses the necessity of combining political strategies in art and artistic strategies in politics. In our post-political times where the dominant discourse tries to occlude the very possibility of an alternative to the current order, all the practices that can contribute to the subversion and destabilization of the hegemonic neo-liberal consensus are welcome. Museums, for instance, can under certain conditions provide spaces for an agonistic confrontation and it is a mistake to believe that artists who choose to work with them cannot play a critical role and that they are automatically recuperated by the system.

I strongly believe that in examining the relation between art and politics, it is necessary to adopt a pluralistic perspective. While asserting the continuing validity of traditional artistic forms, the approach that I advocate also acknowledges the significance of the various forms of artistic activism which have recently flourished. By putting aesthetic means at the service of political activism, this 'artivism' can be seen as a counter-hegemonic move against the capitalist appropriation of aesthetics in order to secure its valorization process. In its manifold manifestations, 'artivism' can certainly help in subverting the post-political common sense and in the creation of new subjectivities. For instance, various modes of activist intervention influenced by the Situationist strategy of 'detournement' like the Yes Men are very effective in disrupting the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to impose, bringing to the fore its repressive character. This is only one example among many and we certainly had the opportunity during the marathon to examine a number of other activist practices and to discuss their connection with the different Occupy movements.

This leads me to what will probably constitute another moot point in our discussions. As I have just made clear, according to the hegemonic approach artistic strategies in politics and political strategies in art are both

legitimate and important. They can play a decisive role in fomenting an agonistic contestation and contribute to the emergence of new subjectivities. However it also asserts that critical artistic practices, in whatever form they are conceived, are no substitute for political practices and that they will never be able, on their own, to bring about a new hegemonic order. In the construction of this new order, the strictly political moment cannot be avoided. The success of radical politics requires new political subjectivities, but this only represents one dimension, vital as it is, in the war of position. Many other steps need to be taken for it to be successful in establishing a new hegemony and the long march through the political institutions cannot be averted.

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