

ON THE POLITICAL, PUBLIC SPACE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A CRITICAL ARCHITECTURE

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In ordinary language, it is not very common to speak about ‘the political.’¹ However, to distinguish between the political and politics opens up an important alley for reflection. I am not the first nor the only one to make this distinction. A variety of political theorists do the same, but with different remit. Some theorists envisage the political as a space of freedom and public deliberation. This we call the associative view of the political. Others understand it as a space of power and conflict, which we call the dissociative view. My understanding belongs to this second perspective. With the term ‘the political,’ I refer to the dimension of antagonism, which, I argue, is constitutive of human societies. Politics is the set of practices and institutions through which a certain order is created. This order organizes human coexistence in a context of conflict. According to the dissociative perspective, political questions always require decision making to choose between conflicting alternatives. And, contrary to the dominant view under neoliberalism today, those political decisions cannot be reduced to technical issues which can be solved by experts. In neoliberal societies, there is an incapacity to think politically. In this article, I will reflect upon the issue of public space and the potential of artistic practices in the context of conflict and antagonism.

1. THE POLITICAL

To a great extent the contemporary incapacity to think politically is not only caused by the uncontested hegemony of neoliberalism, but also by liberalism in general. With “liberalism,” I do not mean “economic liberalism,” which is the basis

of capitalism, nor “political liberalism,” as a set of political institutions, I refer here to the philosophical discourse, which has got many variances, some more progressive than others. Though there is no common essence, there is a multiplicity of what we could call, using an expression of Ludwig Wittgenstein, family resemblance. Save a few exceptions, the dominant tendency in liberal thought is characterised by a rationalist and individualist approach, which, in my view, is not able to adequately grasp the pluralistic nature of the social world with the conflicts that pluralism entails—conflicts for which there is no rational solution. The typical liberal understanding of pluralism is that we live in a world in which there are many perspectives, many values, and different beliefs. However, through serious deliberations and rational negotiations, these different perspectives can constitute harmonious and non-conflictual perspectives. This type of liberalism negates the political in its antagonistic dimension. One of its main tenets is a belief in the possibility of universal consensus, which can be established through strict rational reasoning. But to acknowledge the antagonism of the political underscores the inescapable moment of decision. I use ‘decision’ here in the Derridean sense. As Derrida insisted, to decide is always to decide in an undecidable terrain. A decision made after calculation, is not a decision at all. Decision-making in an undecidable terrain means choosing between alternatives that cannot be resolved through rational reasoning. The antagonism of the political reveals the limits of any rational consensus, and therefore is antithetical to the liberal vision.

When examining the different perspectives existing within contemporary liberal political thought, we can distinguish two main paradigms. The first is called the aggregative paradigm. There is a confluence with the associative view of the political, but it is not exactly the same. The aggregative view envisages politics as the establishment of a compromise between competing forces in society. Individual participants are portrayed as rational beings, driven by the maximization of their own interest. This is an instrumental understanding of acting; (it is) market ideology applied to the domain of politics. The instrumental view easily apprehends politics through economics and is often dominant in political science departments, for instance in the broadly accepted rational choice theory.

The second paradigm is dominant within philosophical discourses, and is often called the deliberative paradigm. Two of their representatives are John Rawls in the United States and Jürgen Habermas in Germany. They somehow developed their views in reaction to the instrumentalist model. Their argument is that there is more to politics than just the search for personal interests. Instead of an instrumental rationality, they

propose a communicative rationality, believing that it is possible to create a rational moral consensus by means of free discussion. In this case, politics is not apprehended through economics, but through ethics or morality. What these views leave aside through their rationalist approach is precisely what, to me, is the specificity of politics: the fact that in politics we are always dealing with a “we” as opposed to a “them.” This does not mean that antagonism is always present, but it is an ever-present possibility.

Another drawback of the rationalism of liberalism is that it is not able to acknowledge the crucial role played by what I call passions in politics. I refer here to the affective dimension, which is central to the constitution of any collective form of identification. Political identification is always collective, and this implies an affective dimension. Liberalism, with its methodological individualism, is not able to grasp the specificity of the political, the collective and the affective.

In my work, I argue that only when we acknowledge the political in its antagonistic dimension, can we pose the central question for democratic politics. This is not to question how to negotiate a compromise, or what kind of procedure is needed to reach a rational, fully inclusive consensus. It is impossible to establish a consensus without exclusion. Therefore, despite what many liberals want us to believe, the specificity of democratic politics is not to overcome this “we/them” opposition, but how to construct this opposition to be compatible with the recognition of pluralism. In order to answer this question, I use the notion of the “constitutive outside,” a term proposed by the American philosopher Henry Staten in his book *Wittgenstein and Derrida*.² He uses this term to refer to a number of terms that are developed by Jacques Derrida, like Derrida’s notions of supplement, trace, and *différance*. The aim of those notions is to highlight the fact that the creation of an identity always implies the establishment of difference. This

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difference is moreover often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy, for instance man/woman, black/white. This view is based on Ferdinand de Saussure's claim that every identity is relational, and acknowledges that the affirmation of a difference is the precondition for the existence of any identity. In other words, the perception of something other that constitutes its exterior is the precondition of existence of an identity. If we accept this, and apply it to the field of politics, we can understand that the constitution of the "we" is what politics is about and that politics cannot exist without the determination of a "them." The identity of a "we" needs to have a constitutive outside, a "them." But this does not mean that such a relation is necessarily antagonistic.

In politics we thus deal with collective identities on the basis of "we/ them." Those differences can simply be a pure difference. To give an example: "we," the French, need to have a "them," the German. Or "we," the Catholic, and "them," the Protestant or the Muslim. This is not necessarily a relation of antagonism. But under certain conditions, this "we/them," can become an antagonism, and can be constructed on the basis of friend and enemy. This happens, for instance, when the "them" is perceived as questioning the identity of the "we," thus threatening its existence. From that moment on, any form of "we/them" relation, being from religious, ethnic, economic, or other origin, becomes antagonistic. An example that I often give to my students is the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The Slovenian, the Bosnian, the Croat and the Serb were not enemies, but in certain circumstances, such as those in the death of Tito and the coming to power of Milošević, who tried to establish Serbian supremacy, they began to see each other as enemies. Their relationship became antagonistic. This is important to realize, the ever-present possibility that "we/them" relations become antagonistic.

Upon that remark, I would like to stress that identities are always a result of processes of identification. Identities, as Freud claims, can never be completely fixed. Therefore, we are never confronted with "we/them" opposition that expresses essentialist pre-existing identities. This is an important point to stress, since the "them" represent the condition of possibility of the "we," as I argued above. This means that the constitution of a specific "we" always depends on the type of "them" from which it is differentiated. The crucial point is that this allows us to envisage the possibility of a different type of "we/them" relation according to the way the "them" is constructed.

Since all forms of political identities entail a "we/them" distinction, this means that the possibility of emergence of antagonism can never be eliminated. I thus assert that the political belongs to our ontological

condition. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Ernesto Laclau and I argue that next to the concept of antagonism, there is another concept which is crucial to address the political: the concept of hegemony.³ To acknowledge the dimension of the political, the ever-present possibility of antagonism, requires coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the undecidability that pervades every order. It requires recognizing what we call the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order. Every society is the product of a series of practices which attempt to establish an order in a specific context. But this context is always contingent. It is important to realise that according to such a conception, society cannot be seen as the unfolding of a logic that will be exterior to itself, whatever the source of this logic will be — the forces of production for Marx, nor the development of the spirit for Hegel. Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. This means that things could always have been otherwise and that every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. To acknowledge this can also be called political: it is always the expression of a particular structure of power relations. There are always other possibilities that have been repressed, but that can also be reactivated. Every hegemonic order is susceptible to being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, practices that will attempt to disarticulate the existing order, to install another form of hegemony. This is what the agonistic struggle is about: the struggle between hegemonies.

The political is linked to those acts of hegemonic institution, and in this sense can be differentiated from the social. This distinction between the social and political is important. These two domains are two different ways of looking at the same thing. The social is the basis of ‘sedimented practices’, referring to practices that conceal the act of the contingent political institution. These practices appear as if they were self-grounded. Or to put it differently,

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we take these practices for granted. There is a need for such sedimented practices, as you cannot have everything in perpetual flux. The social and the political have the status of what Martin Heidegger called ‘existentials,’ which are the necessary forms of societal life.

2. ON PUBLIC SPACES

Once the ever-present possibility of antagonism is acknowledged, one can understand why one of the main tasks of democratic politics consists in defusing the potential antagonism that exists in social relations. A society cannot exist in constant flux or civil war. There is a need for some form of stability. If we accept that this stability cannot be achieved by transcending the “we/them” relation, but only by constructing it in a different way, then the following question arises: what could constitute a tame relation, a sublimated form of antagonism? What form of “we/them” will this imply? Or to put it differently, how could conflict be accepted as legitimate and take a form that does not destroy the political association? This requires that some kind of common bond exists between the parties in conflict so that they will not treat their opponents as enemies to be eradicated. That would be a form of civil war, because they will see their demands as illegitimate. This is precisely what happens in an antagonistic enemy relation. However, the opponents cannot be seen simply as competitors whose interests can be dealt with either through negotiation, the aggregative conception, or reconciled by deliberation (the deliberative view). In that case, the antagonistic element will simply have been eliminated. The two solutions offered by liberalism are not adequate, precisely because they do not recognise the inevitable dimension of antagonism and the fact of the hegemonic conception of society. If we thus want to acknowledge on one side the inevitability of the antagonistic dimension, while on the other allowing for the possibility of its sublimation, of its taming, we need to envisage a third type of relation. And this is the type of relation that I have proposed to call agonism.

Antagonism is a “we/them” relation in which the two sides are enemies, wherein these two sides do not share any common ground. There is no symbolic space among them. Agonism is also a “we/them” relation with conflicting parties. However, with agonism, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, the two sides recognise the legitimacy of their opponents. They are adversaries, not enemies. This means that when in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association. They are sharing a common symbolic space and it is within this space that the conflict takes place. What exists among them is a conflictual consensus. They have different interpretations of the shared political values.

What is at stake in agonistic struggle is in fact the very configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured. It is a struggle between opposing hegemonic projects, which cannot be reconciled rationally. The antagonistic dimension is always present, it is a real confrontation, but one which is played out under regulated conditions by democratic procedures. The agonistic conception of democracy acknowledges the contingent character of the hegemonic political-economic articulation, which informs a specific configuration of a society at a given moment. This is a precarious and pragmatic construction, which can be disarticulated and transformed as a result of the agonistic struggle among the adversaries. Contrary to the values of the liberal model, the agonistic approach recognises that society is always politically instituted. It never forgets that the terrain in which the hegemonic intervention takes place is necessarily the outcome of previous hegemonic practices. This is why the agonistic model denies the possibility of a non-adversarial democratic politics and criticises those who, by ignoring this dimension of the political, reduce politics to a set of supposedly technical moves and neutral procedures. Unfortunately, the latter is the dominant view in the neoliberal hegemonic, as I stated previously.

The most important consequence of the agonistic model of democracy for the issue of public space is that this conception challenges the widespread notions that inform most liberal visions, wherein public space is regarded as the terrain where consensus could possibly be reached. For the agonistic model, public spaces are the battlefields where different hegemonic projects are confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation. In this view, we are not dealing with one single public space. According to the hegemonic approach, public spaces are always plural. The agonistic confrontation takes place in a multiplicity of discursive surfaces. The second important point I want to make is that

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while there is no underlying principle of unity, no predetermined centre to this diversity of spaces, there always exist diverse forms of articulation amongst them. We are not faced with the dispersion envisaged by some modernist thinkers. This is, for instance, the big difference between our approach and the one of Michel Foucault. Many parts of our previously mentioned book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* are influenced by Foucault, such as the conception of power. But we part company with Foucault when he asserts the pure multiplicity of public spaces. We argue, on the contrary, that public spaces are always hegemonically structured. Given the fact that hegemony results from the specific articulation of a diversity of spaces, this means that the hegemonic struggle always consists in the attempt to create a different form of articulation.

This not only differentiates our view from Foucault's, it is also differentiated from Jürgen Habermas's view, who reflected a lot about the political public space. When he envisages a public sphere, Habermas presents it as a place where deliberation aiming at the rational consensus takes place. To be sure, Habermas accepts that it is improbable that such a consensus could effectively be reached, given the limitation of social life. He therefore presents this consensus, this ideal situation of communication, as a regulative idea. I would argue that this is, though slightly different, fundamentally the same conception. According to the perspective that I am advocating, the impediments to Habermas's ideal speech situation are not empirical. For Habermas, we would never be able to reach it, because we will never be able to completely coincide with our rational self, to leave aside all our particularities. The impediments are therefore empirical. To me, however, those impediments are not empirical, they are ontological. And the rational consensus that Habermas presents as a regulative idea is, in my view, a conceptual impossibility.

My idea of agonistic public space also differs from Hannah Arendt's. In my view, the main problem with Arendt's understanding of agonism is, to put it in a nutshell, that it is an agonism without antagonism. Arendt puts a great emphasis on plurality and insists that politics deals with the community and reciprocity of human beings which are different from one another. This is essential to her view. But she never acknowledges that this plurality is at the origin of antagonistic conflicts. According to Arendt, to think politically is to develop the ability to see things from a multiplicity of perspectives. In a reference to Immanuel Kant, in her book *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, she refers to his idea of enlarged thought.⁴ For Arendt, this idea is a model of political practices, which testifies that her conception of pluralism is in fact inscribed in the horizon of an intersubjective agreement. What Arendt looks for in Kant's doctrine

of aesthetic judgment is in fact a procedure for ascertaining intersubjective agreement in the public space. This is why I will argue that while significant differences in their respective approaches exist, Arendt and Habermas both end up envisaging the public space as one free from antagonism. Both belong to the associative conception of politics, which is distinct from the dissociative conception of politics that I advocate.

3. ON ARTISTIC PRACTICES AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A CRITICAL ARCHITECTURE

So far, I have argued that 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 relation between art and politics. This relation should not be envisaged in terms of two separate constituted fields, art on one side, politics on the other, between which a relation will need to be established. According to this approach there is an aesthetic dimension in the political and a political dimension in art. Indeed, from the point of view of the theory of hegemony, artistic and cultural practices play a role in the constitution and the maintenance of a given symbolic order, as well as in challenging this hegemonic order. And this is why artistic and cultural practices necessarily have a political dimension. This is why I have suggested that it is not useful to make a distinction between political and non-political art. I therefore prefer to speak about critical art. Identifying the critical to the political implies that all artistic practices that are not critical are not political either. But, as said, there is a political dimension in all forms of art. The importance of the hegemonic approach for critical art is that it highlights the fact that the construction of a hegemony is not limited to the traditional political institutions, but that it also takes place in a multiplicity of spaces, which are usually called

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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 calls the common sense. This common sense provides the terrain in which specific forms of subjectivity are constructed. Gramsci insists that the domain of culture plays a crucial role there, as it is one of the terrains where common sense is built and subjectivities are created.

This hegemonic approach reveals that artistic practices constitute an important terrain for the construction of political identities. It allows us to grasp the decisive role that those practices could also play in the counter-hegemonic struggle, because they contribute to the emergence of new forms of subjectivity. An important dimension of the counter-hegemonic struggle is indeed the transformation of the common sense as the space where specific forms of subjectivity are constructed. From this perspective, critical art is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices that are going to contribute to question the dominant hegemony. The objective is a transformation of political identities through the creation of new practices, new language games, that will mobilize affects in a way that allows for the disarticulation of the framework in which current forms of identification are taking place. As such, artistic practices allow other forms of identification to emerge.

It is worth indicating that there are different answers to the question of what critical art is. In fact, it is important to acknowledge that not all conceptions of radical politics envisage the criticality of artistic practices in the same way. We can, I would like to argue, roughly distinguish two main strategies to visualize radical politics, one that I have in my book *Agonistics* called ‘engagement with’ and the other ‘desertion from.’⁵ The second one, which is promoted by thinkers like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and their followers, reject any engagement with the state and all existing institutions. In their recent work, Hardt and Negri have moved a bit from that view, but most of their followers have not. The strategy that they advocate is one of exodus, that calls for the desertion of the places of power, which is justified by the claim that under the current condition of cognitive capitalism, exodus is the only form of resistance to the domination of bio-power. Desertion should include the institutions of the art world, which they see as totally instrumentalized by the creative industries. The art world has become complicit with capitalism, and thus can no longer provide a site of resistance.

Against this view of radical politics in terms of exodus, the strategy that the hegemonic approach advocates, is one that, again borrowing a term from Gramsci, we call a “war of positions.” It does not consist

in withdrawing from existing institutions, but by engaging with them in order to bring about a profound transformation in the way they function. This war of positions targets the nodal points around which neoliberal hegemony is established, disarticulating the key discourses and practices through which neoliberal hegemony is sustained and reproduced. It thus consists of the diversity of counter-hegemonic practices and interventions, which operates in a multiplicity of domains: economic, legal, political, and cultural. The domain of culture plays a crucial role in this war of positions, because this is the space where the common sense is established and subjectivities are constructed. Critical artistic and cultural practices can contribute to the fostering of an agonistic confrontation by making visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. This permits challenges to the existing hegemony. I want to insist that this can be done in a diversity of ways, in a multiplicity of interventions and in active engagement with a wide range of institutions in a variety of spaces. There are many terrains in which artistic and cultural practices can unsettle the established common sense and contribute to the emergence of new forms of subjectivity.

But what about architecture? Can it be critical as well? Recognizing the role of cultural artistic practices in the construction of a hegemony contributes to visualising the role that architectural practices could play in the construction, reproduction, and transformation of a hegemony. The possibility of a critical architecture starts with the acknowledgment that the social is always discursively constructed and that architecture also has a political dimension. However, it is one thing to recognize its political dimension, another to determine whether this political dimension is critical. As I have stated previously, the political does not equate with the critical. Once we can recognize the political dimension of architecture,

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we can follow different strategies to guide this political dimension. What strategy will then orient us in a critical direction? The strategy that Laclau and I advocated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the strategy that I still advocate in my book, *For a Left Populism*, is a strategy of critical engagement with institutions in order to transform them.⁶ This is a matter of both the disarticulation of a given hegemony, as well as the importance of creating something new. A critical approach always consists of a double movement, of disarticulation and rearticulation.

It seems to me that this strategy of “engagement with” is particularly suited to critical architectural practices. Moreover, I cannot really think of architectural practices that correspond to a strategy of exodus. In architecture, one is always, it seems to me, dealing with presentation, construction, and mediation, and those are precisely the things that the exodus strategy rejects.

ENDNOTES

1. This article is a lightly edited transcript of Chantal Mouffe’s keynote lecture at the *5th Biennial Conference of the International Society of the Philosophy of Architecture* (ISPA), held via Zoom at Monte Verita, Ascona, Switzerland, on July 4th, 2021.
2. Henri Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).
3. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards Radical Democratic Politics* (London/New York: Verso, 2001).
4. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).
5. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically* (London/New York: Verso, 2013).
6. Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018).