DO 'DEMOCRACY' AND 'THE WEST' AMOUNT TO THE SAME THING?
CAN EUROPE EVER UNITE?
WHAT IS THE NATURE OF RADICAL POLITICS?
CAN ART EVER BE TRULY CRITICAL?

Political conflict in our society is inevitable, and its results are often far from negative. How then should we deal with the intractable differences arising from complex modern culture?

Developing her groundbreaking political philosophy of agonistics – the search for a radical and plural democracy – Chantal Mouffe examines international relations, strategies for radical politics, the future of Europe and the politics of artistic practices. She shows that in many circumstances where no alternatives seem possible, agonistics offers a new road map for change. Engaging with cosmopolitanism, post-operaism, and theories of multiple modernities she argues in favour of a multipolar world with real cultural and political pluralism.

Chantal Mouffe is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Westminster in London. Her previous books include *The Democratic Paradox*, *The Return of the Political*, and *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, all available from Verso.

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Chantal Mouffe

AGONISTICS

THINKING THE WORLD POLITICALLY

Contents

that communism and the withering away of the state logically entailed each other, Laclau and I assert that the emancipatory project can no longer be conceived of as the elimination of power and the management of common affairs by social agents identified with the viewpoint of the social totality. There will always be antagonism, struggles and division of the social, and the need for institutions to deal with them will never disappear.

By locating socialism in the wider field of the democratic revolution, we indicated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that the political transformations that will eventually enable us to transcend capitalist society are founded on the plurality of social agents and their struggles. Thus the field of social conflict is extended rather than being concentrated in a 'privileged agent' such as the working class.

It is for this reason that we reformulated the emancipatory project in terms of a radicalization of democracy. We emphasized that the extension and radicalization of democratic struggles will never have a final point of arrival in the achievement of a fully liberated society. This is why the myth of communism as a transparent and reconciled society – which clearly implies the end of politics – must be abandoned.

Chapter 5

Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices

Art occupies an increasingly central place in our societies, but can it still play a critical role? It is often argued that in late capitalism, aesthetics has triumphed in all realms, and that the effect of this triumph has been the creation of an hedonistic culture where there is no place anymore for art to provide a truly subversive experience. The blurring of the lines between art and advertising is such that the very idea of critical public spaces has lost its meaning. With the pervasive control of the market, the distinction between public and private has ceased to be pertinent, since even the public has become privatized. Every critical gesture is quickly recuperated and neutralized by the forces of corporate capitalism.

To be sure, this situation is not completely new. The development of the culture industry was a preoccupation of Adorno and Horkheimer, who saw it as the moment when the fordist mode of production finally managed to enter into the field of culture. They presented this evolution as a further stage in the process of commodification and of the subjugation of society to the requisites of capitalist production.

Adorno, however, still believed in the possibility for art to provide a space for autonomy. It is precisely this possibility that some claim has disappeared, declaring that nowadays

Adorno and Horkheimer's worst nightmares have come true. Art has been subsumed by the aesthetics of biopolitical capitalism and autonomous production is no longer possible. The production of symbols has become a central goal of capitalism, and through the development of the creative industries individuals are now totally subjugated to the control of capital. Not only consumers but cultural producers too are prisoners of the culture industry dominated by the media and entertainment corporations. We have all been transformed into passive functions of the capitalist system.

Fortunately, this pessimistic diagnosis is not shared by everybody. For instance, some post-operaist theorists maintain that the analysis of Adorno and Horkheimer, based as it is on the fordist model, does not provide a useful guide for examining the new forms of production that have become dominant in the post-fordist mode of capitalist regulation. They see those new forms of production as allowing for new types of resistance, and they envisage the possibility of a revitalization of the emancipatory project, to which artistic practices could make a decisive contribution.

Paolo Virno, for instance, paints a different picture to that of Horkheimer and Adorno. In *A Grammar of the Multitude*, he asserts that the culture industries have played an important role in the transition from fordism to post-fordism.[1] In his view, they represent the 'matrix of post-fordism'. 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 labour in its totality appropriates the special characteristics of the performing artist. We

1 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004.

are witnessing a process of hybridization between spheres of labour, political action and intellectual reflection, which were previously distinct because they were supported by radically heterogeneous principles and criteria. Today the boundaries between pure intellectual activity, political action and labour have dissolved, and post-fordist labour has absorbed into itself many of the characteristics of political action.

This transformation opens the way for novel forms of social relations in which art and work exist in new configurations. The objective of artistic practices should be to foster the development of those new social relations that 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. What is needed in the current situation is a widening of the field of artistic intervention, with artists working in a multiplicity of social spaces outside traditional institutions in order to oppose the program of the total social mobilization of capitalism.

From a different perspective, André Gorz also points to the potentialities of the new forms of production when he writes that

> When self-exploitation acquires a central role in the process of valorization, 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 which necessarily overflows the terrain of production of knowledge towards new practices of living, consuming and collective appropriation of common spaces and everyday culture.[2]

2 Interview with André Gorz, *Multitudes* 15, 2004, 209.

I also believe that the terrain of the production of subjectivity is of strategic importance. I agree with Brian Holmes that '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 am convinced that artistic and cultural practices can offer spaces for resistance that undermine the social imaginary necessary for capitalist reproduction. But I think that to apprehend their political potential, we should visualize forms of artistic resistance as agonistic interventions within the context of counter-hegemonic struggles.

In chapter 4, I argued that to adequately grasp the transition from fordism to post-fordim, it is necessary to introduce its hegemonic dimension. I suggested that this could be done by using several insights found in Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, where they emphasize the role played by what they call 'artistic critique' in the transformation undergone by capitalism in the last decades of the twentieth century.[4] They show how the aesthetic strategies of the counter-culture – the search for authenticity, the ideal of self-management, the anti-hierarchical exigency, and the demands for autonomy made by the new movements of the '60s – have been harnessed in the development of the post-fordist networked economy to promote the conditions required by the current mode of capitalist regulation. Through 'neo-management', artistic critique had become an important element of capitalist productivity.

At first sight, this analysis would seem to support the pessimistic view about the end of a critical role for art. But by allowing me to see the transition from fordism to post-fordism in hegemonic terms, Boltanski and Chiapello have

3 Brian Holmes, 'Artistic Autonomy', www.u-tangente.org.

4 Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London and New York: Verso, 2005.

in fact provided the framework for the argument that I want to make in this chapter about the importance of artistic and cultural practices in the counter-hegemonic struggle. Indeed, when the current neo-liberal hegemony is seen in terms of a 'passive revolution', as the result of a set of political interventions in a complex field of economic, legal and ideological forces, its discursive nature comes to the fore.

Such an hegemony is the result of a discursive construction that articulates in a very specific manner a manifold of practices, discourses and language games of a very diverse nature. If it can be perceived as the natural consequence of technological progress, it is because, through a process of sedimentation, the political origin of those contingent practices has been erased; they have become naturalized, and the forms of identification that they have produced have crystallized in identities which are taken for granted. This is why neo-liberal practices and institutions appear as the outcome of natural processes, as a fate that we have to accept because 'there is no alternative'.

The importance of the hegemonic approach to artistic practices and their relation to politics is that it highlights the fact that the hegemonic confrontation is not limited to traditional political institutions. It also takes place in the multiplicity of places where hegemony is constructed, bringing to light the political centrality 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 'common sense', which provides the terrain in which specific forms of subjectivity are constructed. And he repeatedly emphasized the centrality of cultural and artistic practices in the formation and diffusion of common sense, underlining the decisive role played by those practices in the reproduction

or disarticulation of a given hegemony. If it is the result of a discursive articulation, common sense can be transformed through counter-hegemonic interventions, and this is where cultural and artistic practices can play a decisive role.

By stressing the role of cultural practices in capitalist productivity, Boltanski and Chiapello's analyses also confirm how, in times of post-fordist production, this role has become absolutely crucial. Today's capitalism relies increasingly on semiotic techniques in order to create the modes of subjectivation that are necessary for its reproduction. In modern production, the control of souls, as set out by Foucault, plays a strategic role in governing affects and passions. The forms of exploitation characteristic of the times when manual labour was dominant have been replaced by new ones that constantly require the creation of new needs and the incessant desire for the acquisition of goods. This explains why, in our consumer societies, advertising plays such an important role.

This role, however, is not limited to promoting specific products. It also produces fantasy worlds with which the consumers of goods can identify. Nowadays, to buy something is to enter into a specific world, to become part of an imagined community. To maintain its hegemony, the current capitalist system needs to constantly mobilize people's desires and shape their identities. It is the construction of the very identity of the buyer that is at stake in the techniques of advertising.

A counter-hegemonic politics must therefore engage with this terrain so as to foster other forms of identification. While one of the objectives of the hegemonic struggle has always been the agonistic production of new subjectivities, it is clear that, in the present stage of capitalism, such a terrain is more important than ever.

AGONISTIC PUBLIC SPACES

Once the centrality of the cultural terrain is acknowledged, how can cultural and artistic practices contribute to the counter-hegemonic challenge to neo-liberal hegemony?

Before addressing this question, I want to clarify that I do 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 need be established. There is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in 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, and this is where its aesthetic dimension resides. This is why I believe that it is not useful to make a distinction between political and non-political art.

Instead, the crucial question concerns the possible forms of *critical* art. According to the approach that I am advocating, this means examining the different ways in which artistic practices can contribute to unsettling the dominant hegemony. To address this issue requires scrutinizing the role of critical artistic practices in the public space. I am not referring here to one single space but a multiplicity of discursive surfaces and public spaces. Secondly, while there is neither an underlying principle of unity, nor a predetermined centre to this diversity of spaces, there always exists diverse forms of articulation among them. We are not confronted with the kind of dispersion envisaged by some post-modernist thinkers. Nor are we faced with the kind of 'smooth' space described by 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 in an attempt to create a different form of articulation among public spaces.

And what distinguishes the agonistic approach to the public space from other approaches? Its main characteristic is that it challenges the widespread view that, albeit in different ways, informs most visions of the public space. According to the accepted view, the public space is the terrain where one aims at creating consensus. For the agonistic approach, on the contrary, the public space is where conflicting points of view are confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation. Such a conception is clearly very different from the one 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 merely linked to empirical limitations. They are of an ontological nature. As I indicated in the first chapter, one of the main tenets of agonistics is that the kind of rational consensus which Habermas's approach postulates 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.

The way public spaces are envisaged has important consequences for artistic and cultural practices because those who foster the creation of agonistic public spaces will conceive critical art in a very different way than those whose aim is the creation of consensus. The agonistic approach sees critical art as constituted by a manifold of artistic practices 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 all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony. There is, however, a point that needs to be clarified to avoid any misunderstanding about the way the agonistic approach understands critique. Critical artistic practices, according to this view, do not aspire 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'. As I indicated earlier, it is always through insertion in a manifold of practices, discourses and language games that specific forms of individualities are constructed. This is why the transformation of political identities can never result from a rationalist appeal to the true interest of the subject, but rather from the inscription of the social agent in a set of practices that will mobilize its affects in a way that disarticulates the framework in which the dominant process of identification takes place. As Yannis Stavrakakis points out, 'a critique of an ideological system of meaning cannot be effective if it remains at a purely deconstructive level; it requires a mapping of the fantasies supporting this system and an encircling of its symptomatic function'.[5] 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 previously available, ready to emerge when

5 Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, 81.

the weight of the dominant ideology has 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 the construction of identities.

ALFREDO JAAR'S COUNTER-HEGEMONIC INTERVENTIONS

To illustrate my argument, I will take the case of Alfredo Jaar, whose work provides one of the best examples of an aesthetics of resistance informed by the hegemonic strategy that I am advocating. We find in his practice the plurality of forms of artistic intervention that an hegemonic approach requires and the multiplicity of sites where they should take place.

Defining himself as a 'project artist' who responds to specific issues in specific places, Jaar has repeatedly emphasized that it is vital for him to intervene in several fields, not only in the art world but also in public spaces and in various educational sites.[6] Contrary to those who claim that an efficient critique can only exist outside institutions, he sees institutions as an important terrain of struggle. Combining these three types of activities, he is able to intervene in a variety of sites where the dominant hegemony is established and reproduced, contributing in this way to the development of counter-hegemonic moves.

Alfredo Jaar's artistic interventions chime with the hegemonic approach in several ways. They have generally been described as providing 'counter-information' (Georges Didi-Huberman) or building a 'counter-environment' (Adriana Valdes). In both cases, Jaar emphasizes what I have previously referred to as a strategy of 'disarticulating' the

6 See, for instance, Jaar's 'Interview with Luigi Fassi', *Klat*, Winter 2009–2010, 73–74.

existing 'common sense' and fostering a variety of agonistic public spaces that contribute to the development of a 'counter-hegemony'.

Such a strategy is manifest in 'Questions Questions', a public intervention in Milan in the fall of 2008, which Jaar sees as his most Gramscian project. To react to the control of the Italian public space by Berlusconi's media and advertising network, he put placards on public buses, billboards, subways and trams to raise questions such as 'Does politics need culture?' or 'Is the intellectual useless?' He explained that his aim was to 'try to create little cracks in the system' by occupying every space available for three months, so as to create a network of resistance and to restore the meaning of the public space, which had been erased by the control of Berlusconi.

What is particularly interesting in this form of intervention is its mode of unsettling common sense by posing apparently simple questions, albeit questions that, in the specific context of the intervention, are likely to trigger reflections that will arouse discontent with the current state of things. Diverging from some forms of critical art that believe it is by giving people lessons about the state of the world that they will be moved to act, and against the fashionable emphasis on transgression and denunciation as the most radical forms of resistance, Jaar aims at moving people to act by creating in them a desire for change. Discarding the authoritative mode of address, he prefers to interpellate people by setting in motion a process that will make them question their unexamined beliefs. He is convinced that the best way to move people to act is by awaking consciousness of what is missing in their lives and by bringing them to feel that things could be different.

An excellent example of how art can contribute to the

emergence of a need – to the awareness that something is missing from our lives, thereby arousing in us a desire for change – is his project for the Skoghall Konsthall in 2000. Invited to create a work by the Swedish city of Skoghall, known for its paper industry, and realizing that it lacked a building for artistic exhibitions, Jaar decided to enlist the support of the major paper enterprise for the construction of a Konsthall built out of paper, so as to provide the inhabitants with a place for culture. He decided that one day after opening with an exhibition of young Swedish artists, the building was to be burnt down. And this is what happened, despite the fact that a group of citizens asked him to save it. Although very happy about their reaction, Jaar explained that he did not want to impose on the community an institution that they had never fought for.

The story, however, did not stop there. Thanks to this intervention, a growing number of citizens of Skoghall began to realize that something was really lacking in their town. Seven years later, Jaar was invited back to design and build the first permanent Skoghall Konsthall. This project is emblematic on several counts. Besides testifying to Jaar's pedagogical strategy of never imposing his own vision but instead bringing people to articulate their own needs, this work is also an illustration of his ability to engage with institutions in a critical way.

This brings me to what I see as one of the most important aspects of Jaar's approach: his profound grasp of the role that affect plays in the process of identification and of the role of passionate attachments in the constitution of political identities. If artistic practices can play a decisive role in the construction of new forms of subjectivity, it is because, in using resources which induce emotional responses, they are able to reach human beings at the affective level. This is where

art's great power lies – in its capacity to make us see things in a different way, to make us perceive new possibilities.

As Dewey pointed out, works of art allow us, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, to participate in new experiences and to establish forms of relationships that are different from the ones we are used to. This point is not meant to deny that there is a cognitive dimension to art, but to assert that it is through the affects that it can reach the intellect. Alfredo Jaar is deeply aware of this, and he has consistently deployed modes of interpellation that transform people's consciousness by acting on their sensations. The aim of his interventions is to bring about, through aesthetic means, new modes of identification. As he once commented, the effect of the aesthetic experience should be to move us 'through our senses and through our reason'.

ARTISTIC ACTIVISM

The agonistic approach that I am advocating is, I think, particularly useful for grasping the contribution to radical politics made by the different forms of artistic activism that have emerged recently and that, in a great variety of ways, aim at challenging the existing consensus. These artistico-activist practices are of very different types and have emerged from very different urban struggles, from 'Reclaim the streets' in Britain to 'Tute Bianche' in Italy to the 'Stop advertising' campaigns in France and the 'Nike Ground-Rethinking Space' in Austria.[7]

We can find another example in the strategy of 'identity correction' employed by the Yes Men. Appearing under different identities – for instance, as representatives of the World Trade

7 For a discussion of some of these practices, see autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe, *Manuel de communication guérilla*, Paris: Zones, 2011.

Organization – they have developed a very effective satire of neo-liberal ideology.[8] Their aim is to target institutions that foster neo-liberalism at the expense of people's well-being, and they do this by assuming the identities of these institutions in order to offer correctives. For instance, the following text appeared in 1999 on a parody website designed to look like the real 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. All 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.[9]

Some people mistook this false website for the real one, and the Yes Men even managed to appear as WTO representatives at several international conferences. In one case, their satirical intervention consisted of proposing a telematic worker-surveillance device in the shape of a yard-long golden phallus.

We can better grasp the political character of these varieties of artistic activism if we see them as counter-hegemonic interventions whose objective is to disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism tries to spread, thereby bringing to the fore its repressive character. By putting artistic forms at the

8 See, for instance, their book *The Yes Men: The True Story of the End of the World Trade Organization*, New York: The Disinformation Company, 2004.

9 The Yes Men website: www.theyesmen.org.

service of political activism, these 'artivist' practices represent an important dimension of radical politics. They can be seen as counter-hegemonic moves against the capitalist appropriation of aesthetics and its goal of securing and expanding the valorization process.

Contrary to what some artivists seem to believe, however, this does not mean that artivist practices can alone realize the transformations needed for the establishment of a new hegemony. As Ernesto Laclau and I argued in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, a radical democratic politics calls for the articulation of different levels of struggle so as to create a chain of equivalence among them.[10] It is an illusion to believe that artistic activism could, on its own, bring about the end of neo-liberal hegemony.

MUSEUMS AND INSTITUTIONS

I also disagree with the view that 'artivism' is the only way in which critical art can exist today. This is why I take issue with those who claim that more traditional forms of art cannot be critical and that artists should avoid traditional artistic institutions. Such a position is the expression in the artistic field of the rejection of public institutions advocated by the type of radical critique I criticized in chapter 4. It asserts that political action should only aim at withdrawing from existing institutions and relinquishing all forms of belonging. Institutional attachments are presented as obstacles to the new non-representative forms of 'absolute democracy' suitable for the self-organization of the Multitude.

The exodus approach denies the possibility of a counter-

10 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Second Edition, London and New York: Verso, 2001.

hegemonic struggle within institutions that disarticulates the constitutive elements of neo-liberal hegemony. It perceives all institutions as monolithic representatives of the forces to be destroyed, and every attempt to transform them is dismissed as reformist illusion. The strategy advocated is one of 'desertion' and of the creation of new social relations outside the existing institutional framework. What is foreclosed is an immanent critique of institutions, whose objective is to transform them into a terrain for contesting the hegemonic order.

In the artistic and cultural domain, such an approach implies that critical artistic practices can only have efficacy when taking place outside cultural institutions. To imagine that museums, for instance, could provide a site for critical political intervention is, according to such a view, to be blind to the manifold forces – economic and political – which make their very existence possible. Here again the strategy is to ignore institutions and to occupy other spaces outside the institutional field. Such a perspective is, in my view, profoundly mistaken and clearly disempowering because it prevents us from recognizing the multiplicity of avenues that are open for political engagement. To believe that existing institutions cannot become the terrain of contestation is to ignore the tensions that always exist within a given configuration of forces and the possibility of acting in a way that subverts their form of articulation.

In the case of museums, my view is that, far from being condemned to playing the role of conservative institutions dedicated to the maintenance and reproduction of the existing hegemony, museums and art institutions can contribute to subverting the ideological framework of consumer society. Indeed, they could be transformed into agonistic public spaces where this hegemony is openly contested. Since its beginning, the history of the museum has been linked 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 equally true for institutions, and we should discard the essentialist idea that some institutions are by essence destined to fulfil 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 about the dominant culture and have been reduced to sites of entertainment for a public of consumers. The main objective of these 'post-modern' museums is to make money through blockbuster exhibitions and the sale of a manifold of products for tourists. The type of 'participation' they promote is based on consumerism, and they actively contribute to the commercialization and depoliticization of the cultural field.

However, this neo-liberal turn is not the only possible form of evolution. Another one can be envisaged, one that leads in a progressive direction. There might have been a time when it made sense to abandon museums in order to open new avenues for artistic practices. But in the present conditions, with the art world almost totally colonized by the market, museums can become privileged places for escaping from the dominance of the market. As Boris Groys has pointed out, the museum, which has been stripped of its normative role, could be seen as a privileged place for artworks to be presented in a context that allows them to be distinguished from commercial products.[11] Envisaged in such a way, the museum would offer spaces for resisting the effects of the growing commercialization of art.

To rethink the function of the museum along these lines is a first step towards visualizing it as a possible site for countering

11 See, for instance, Boris Groys, 'The Logic of Aesthetic Rights' in *Art Power*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.

the dictatorship of the global media market. In fact, there are already several examples of museums and art institutions that facilitate the strategy of 'engagement with' that I am proposing. One of the best known is the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), which under the direction of Manuel Borja-Villel (who now heads the Reina Sofia in Madrid) succeeded in creating a new model of what a museum could be.[12]

Between 2000 and 2008, MACBA launched various projects informed by critical pedagogy in order to recover the museum's role as an educational institution and 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 that had been neglected by the dominant discourse on artistic modernity. Another objective of the MACBA was to establish a vibrant relationship between the museum and the city, and to provide a space for debate and conflict. Looking for ways in which art could make a significant contribution to a multiplication of public spaces, the museum encouraged contact between different social movements.

For example, the series of workshops organized in 2002 called *Direct Action as one of the Fine Arts* 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 labour, borders and migrations, gentrification, new media and emancipatory policies. A further example

12 An excellent overview of the activities of MACBA during these years is found in Jorge Ribalta, 'Experiments in a New Institutionality' in *Relational Objects: MACBA Collections 2002–2007*, Barcelona: MACBA Publications, 2010.

of collaboration with new social movements was *How do we want to be governed?*, a project conceived as a counter-model to the 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures launched by the City Council of Barcelona. While using culture as an alibi, the real objective of this forum was to promote the 'urban renewal' of the city's seafront, which was going to be very lucrative for real-estate developers. Curated by Roger Buergel, *How do you want to be governed?* 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 neighbourhood movements.

The experience of MACBA represents a radical alternative to the modern and the post-modern museum, but many other types of initiatives are worth mentioning. At the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, the director Zdenka Badovinac has implemented a very interesting strategy to draw attention to the differences between Eastern and Western social realities, highlighting the divergences between the neo-avant-garde movements in the two regions.[13] In her view, a museum of contemporary art should not cover up antagonisms under a pluralism of pure diversity, but rather underline them. It must put forward the formation of a parallel narrative and create the foundations for the reception of art as it evolved in very different contexts. With this aim, she has put together a number of projects connected to the Balkans and Eastern Europe in general. The objective is to offer more possibilities for local institutions to produce knowledge about their own history, and this indirectly changes the global art system.

13 See, for instance, Zdenka Badovinac, 'Contemporary as Points of Connection' in *E-flux journal: What Is Contemporary Art?* Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010, 152–156.

ARTISTS AS ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS

Acknowledging the political dimension of critical artistic interventions in an agonistic way supposes challenging the idea that to be political means to offer a radical critique requiring a total break with the existing state of affairs. It is this idea that sustains the view that it is no longer possible for art to play a critical role because no critical gesture can escape recuperation. A similar mistake is made by those who believe that radicality means transgression, and that the more transgressive practices are, the more radical. When these people see these transgressions recuperated by the media, they also conclude that it is impossible for art to play a critical role.

We should, for the same reason, find fault with the view that critical art can only consist in manifestations of refusal, that it should be the expression of an absolute negation, a testimony of the 'intractable' and 'unrepresentable', as some advocates of the sublime would have it. Another frequent misconception consists in envisaging critical art in moralistic terms, seeing its role as one of moral condemnation. Given the current situation, where there are no longer any agreed upon criteria for judging art production, there is a marked tendency to replace aesthetic judgments with moral ones, pretending that those moral judgments are also political ones. I regard all of these conceptions as 'anti-political' because they fail to grasp the nature of the hegemonic political struggle.

Envisaged as counter-hegemonic interventions, critical artistic practices can contribute to the creation of a multiplicity of sites where the dominant hegemony can be questioned. In my view, those who work in the field of art and culture belong to the category of what Gramsci calls 'organic intellectuals'.

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; they have an

important role to play in the hegemonic struggle. By constructing new practices and new subjectivities, they can help subvert the existing configuration of power. In fact, this has always been the role of artists, and it is only the modernist illusion of the privileged position of the artist that has made us believe otherwise. Once this illusion is abandoned – along with the revolutionary conception of politics that accompanies it – we can properly envisage the critical role that artistic and cultural practices can play nowadays.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Revising the essays included in this volume for publication, I was struck by the fact that, with the irruption in 2011 and 2012 of popular protests in the Middle East and in the West, many issues that I had been addressing at a theoretical level had suddenly acquired a pressing actuality. To take account of this new conjuncture, I have, during the editing process, added to several chapters some references to recent events. But I feel that more reflection is needed, so this is what I intend to do in this conclusion.

Let me make clear at the outset that I disagree with the tendency to throw together the struggles in Tunisia, Egypt (not to speak of Libya and even Syria), the revolts in the suburbs in France, the riots in Britain, the demonstrations in Israel, the popular mobilizations in Greece, the encampments of the *Indignados* in Spain, the student movement in Chilé and in Québec, the protests in Israel and the various forms of Occupy in the US and in Europe. I am convinced that it is important not to homogenize these very heterogeneous movements.

To be sure, in several cases we find similar features – for instance, the use of social networks like Facebook or microblogging sites such as Twitter – but their role has often been greatly exaggerated. To speak, in the case of Tunisia

and Egypt for instance, of a 'Google revolution' is clearly risible. In the case of the Middle East, it seems that a crucial role was played by television, which, unlike the Internet, was accessible to many popular sectors, either at home or in local cafés.

A more significant commonality concerns the spatial occupation of public places. There is no denying the influence that the model of Midan Al-Tahrir in Cairo had on the occupation of Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Syntagma Square in Athens and the various Occupy camps. But the reasons that brought people to these locations were very different. In the Middle East, the demonstrations were directed against dictatorial regimes, while in Europe and the US they were mainly expressions of resistance against the shortcomings of the democratic system and its subservience to the forces of finance. These movements are products of very specific circumstances and their aims are different. To proclaim that they announce a new type of 'molecular' politics that is bound to displace the 'archaic' representative forms of politics is highly problematic. Moreover, it leads to neglecting the specificity of their various contexts and their particular characteristics.

This is not the place to undertake a careful study of those diverse popular mobilizations; in addition, what interests me is rather different. I want to examine the responses of radical political theorists to these movements and the different ways in which these movements have been interpreted. Many claims have been made on behalf of what is construed as a new type of activism – animated by a universal desire for 'the common' – and these claims are worth scrutinizing. Since they touch directly on several questions I have addressed in this book, this will give me the opportunity to test the pertinence of my agonistic approach for grasping the specificity of the current situation.

Leaving aside the uprisings in the Middle East – which require a different analysis – I will concentrate on how the various mobilizations in liberal democratic societies have been interpreted. We find a broad agreement among political commentators on at least one subject: the recent protests are not mere reactions to the current austerity measures. They reveal a more profound political malaise vis-à-vis democratic institutions, whose crisis they bring to the fore. But opinions diverge about the causes of such a crisis and the remedies that are needed. In examining these divergences, we will see that they proceed from the different approaches to radical politics – either in terms of 'withdrawal from' or 'engagement with' – that I examined in chapter 4. It is indeed this dichotomy that informs the conflicting ways of framing the readings of recent protests and evaluating their potential.

A NEW TYPE OF ACTIVISM?

As a starting point, I want to make an important distinction. Among the popular mobilizations that have recently taken place in liberal democratic societies, there are those that follow more traditional left patterns and there are those that diverge from them. Despite undeniable similarities between them, it is, for instance, misleading to put in the same category the Spanish *Indignados* and the student movement in Chile, as is so often done. In the Chilean case, we have something closer to a classical left-wing mobilization of students fighting for better education and addressing specific demands to the state. It is formally organized, with elected leaders who do not reject party affiliation. The first one of them, Camila Vallejo, is in fact a member of the Communist Party and is now planning to run as a candidate in national elections.

The situation is completely different with the *Indignados* of the 15M movement, who call for *¡Democracia Real Ya!* (Real democracy now). They reject the representative democratic system in favour of 'real' democracy and promote 'assemble-ism' instead of 'parliamentarism'. Insisting on remaining without leaders, they refuse to have anything to do with traditional political institutions like elections, parties and trade unions.

A similar negative posture towards representative politics is found in the *Aganaktismenoi* – the Greek version of the *Indignados* – and in some of the various Occupy movements in Europe and North America, although in the latter case there is at least an indication of who the enemy is: the financial institutions, presented as the 1% oppressing the remaining 99%.

What *Indignados* and Occupiers also share is their rhizomatic horizontal character. They function as leaderless networks, as platforms without a centre. At the beginning, before they were evicted by the local authorities, their focus was on establishing camps in public squares. Having moved to a second phase, they are currently trying to diversify their forms of protest through activism at the neighbourhood level and through organizing around specific issues such as debt, foreclosures and evictions. While some of these initiatives look promising, it is not easy to predict the future of those movements now that they have been forced to abandon their original bases. In any case, since the beginning they have been very diverse and have functioned in a decentralized manner, and it is therefore unlikely that they will evolve in the same way.

What is already clear is that an important development has taken place in Spain and in Greece, where the nature of the protests has been transformed by the involvement

of new constituencies. In the case of Spain, where the right wing Partido Popular (PP) is now in power with an absolute majority, the protests have widened and acquired a different character. Massive mobilizations led by the trade unions have been organized. In these protests, different sectors of the population manifest their rejection of the drastic austerity programme of the PP, centred on public service privatization, administrative re-centralization and the criminalization of protest.

This is also the case in Greece, where, after the almost total disappearance of the *Aganaktismenoi*, there are now mass protests organized by the radical left party Syriza against the policies of the ruling conservative New Democracy party. This indicates, as I will argue later, that the role of left parties should not be overlooked when envisaging the future of these movements and their potential for change.

When these later developments are taken into account, the complex nature of the protests is brought to the fore. This is why their critique of the current democratic system can be interpreted in different ways. Among the protesters we find activists who are against any form of representation altogether, expressing a total rejection of liberal democracy and a yearning for a society reconciled with itself through direct democracy. The aim of other groups, however, is not to get rid of representative institutions but to improve them, so as to make them more accountable to the citizenry. Privileging the first type of critique, many theorists influenced by the exodus approach have interpreted recent mobilizations as a manifestation of the power of the multitude constructing new forms of social relations outside traditional institutions. They celebrate them as the realization of the 'common' and present their encampments as a pre-figuration of 'absolute democracy'.

Some theorists influenced by the exodus approach have emphasized the emergence of new democratic practices of an 'horizontalist' and 'presentist' nature. Isabell Lorey, for instance, who sees these movements as characteristic of the new forms of struggle waged by the precarious workers who are typical of post-fordism, argues that what Spanish *Indignados* advocate with their call for *¡Democracia Real Ya!* is not so much a direct democracy in which all the citizens are able to participate, but a radically different understanding of democracy, beyond representation – a democracy *in actu* that she calls 'presentist democracy'. For her, such a 'presentist' perspective characterizes the Occupy movements in general, and this is where their novelty resides. It is worth quoting her analysis at length because it offers a particularly eloquent version of such a point of view:

> The Occupy Movements signify an exodus from the two complementary figures of direct and representative democracy, an exodus from vertical, unifying institutionalization, because they act in a non-juridical way and practice democracy in a presentist and horizontal way. This is no less than a break with the existing order of 'Western' democracy. The exodus manifests itself in the central public square, in the assembly of the many and in practising new ways of living. This presentist movement is self-organising and instituting a democratic constituent power, which does not want to repeat the old struggles over the takeover of power but instead seeks to release itself from the juridical logic of representation and sovereignty.[1]

Lorey claims that the diverse occupation movements represent radical changes in politics, society and economics, and

1 Isabell Lorey, 'On Democracy and Occupation: Horizontality and the Need for New Forms of Verticality' in *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, ed. Pascal Gielen, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2013, 96–97.

they signal the emergence of 'constituent power beyond representation'. Following the analyses of Antonio Negri, she sees this constituent power as a process that cannot be represented nor embodied in a judicial institutionalized power. She insists that it must reject mediation through representation and should not be tamed into a 'people'. Presentist democracy is, therefore, the opposite of representative democracy; it is a matter of collective political practices without any claim to government.

Mobilizations such as Occupy have received a lot of attention and their resonance is undeniable, but that should not make us forget that it is not the first time that citizens have assembled outside the traditional political channels to make their voices heard. As a recent study undertaken under the direction of Mary Kaldor and Sabine Selchow reminds us, what they call 'subterranean' politics has been around for some time, and what we witnessed in 2011 and 2012 is, as they put it, a 'bubbling up' of subterranean politics.[2] By this term they refer to all types of political groups, initiatives, events or ideas – both on the left and on the right – that are not usually visible in mainstream politics.

Occupy belongs to that category, but so do the 'Wutburger' protests in Germany against 'Stuttgart 21', the manifold of citizen interventions outside the parties, the anti-globalization demonstrations, the World Social Forum networks and many other civil society initiatives in a variety of domains. This is also where they locate the various Pirate parties and, more surprisingly, a variety of right-wing populist movements like Jobbik in Hungary and New Dawn in Greece.

Kaldor and Selchow's study is centred on the emancipatory forms of subterranean politics and gives pride of place

2 Mary Kaldor and Sabine Selchow, 'The "Bubbling Up" of Subterranean Politics in Europe', opendemocracy.net, 12 October 2012.

to the *Indignados* in Europe. It is based on interviews with activists whose answers are worthy of examination. We learn, for instance, that many activists in Occupy are critical of the World Social Forum (WSF), which they see as too influenced by the traditional left. This chimes with the attitude of the *Indignados* of the 15M movement and their rejection of all politicians, both left and right. The answers also betoken the great disparity in the ideological orientations of the activists. This disparity is openly recognized in the manifesto of the 15M movement, where we read: 'Some of us consider ourselves progressive, others conservative. Some of us are believers, some not. Some of us have clearly defined ideologies, other are apolitical.'[3] Given such a heterogeneity of views and the insistence on reaching consensus, it is therefore not surprising that when assemblies finally manage to produce some resolutions through an horizontal process of decision-making, they generally lack the systematic focus necessary to make some specific proposals. Indeed, some activists are against the very idea of formulating demands.

The interviews realized for the project about 'subterranean' politics cast doubt on the claim that the anti-representative position is typical of the majority of the activists. There is no denying that such views are found among the activists involved in these movements, and I am willing to grant the 'presentist' character of some of the practices developed in the camps and the assemblies. But to present the aim of all the outraged as being the establishment of a democracy beyond representation is to read these protests in a very unilateral way.

3 'Manifesto of the 15May movement', quoted in Mary Kaldor, Sabine Selchow, Sean Deel and Tamsin Murray Leach, 'The "Bubbling up" of Subterranean Politics in Europe', Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, 2012, 12. Available at eprints.lse.ac.uk.

But more importantly, in my view, even if those views were dominant, this would not be enough to conclude that such a strategy is adequate and that practices informed by horizontality and presentism should provide the backbone of the progressive struggle. The question we should ask concerns the efficacy of such practices and their potential for bringing about a different type of society where the inequalities they denounce have been abolished.

It could, in fact, be argued that the very evolution of Occupy reveals the limits of these practices, limits that have been acknowledged by the activists themselves. For instance, on 17 September 2012, just one year after the birth of Occupy Wall Street, Mark Greif, who had been deeply involved in it, wrote an article where he asserted that, although it had been successful in putting the issue of equality on the agenda, Occupy had failed in most of its objectives with respect to Wall Street and the financial institutions.[4] Greif's appreciation of the pros and cons of the Occupy camps is shared by many people who have celebrated their impact on the political discourse in the US, while noting their lack of a strategy for bringing about institutional changes.

In voicing the outrage against the obscene inequalities existing in the midst of Western societies, those movements have raised important issues, and this can hopefully motivate people to call for an alternative. But this is only the beginning, and to effectively transform power relations, the new consciousness that arises out of those protests requires institutional channels. As I have argued in this book, in order to challenge neo-liberalism, it is necessary to engage with its key institutions. It is not enough to organize new forms of existence of the common, outside the dominant capitalist structures,

4 Mark Greif, 'Occupy Wall Street a un an', *Le Monde*, 17 September 2012.

as if the latter would progressively ebb away without any confrontation.

As Mark Fisher, uncovering the limits of horizontalism, writes:

> If Occupy does not aim – at least at some point – to influence government policy or – at least at some point – to influence hegemony via mainstream media, what are its hopes? In its deployment of horizontalism, Occupy aims to be pre-figurative: it wants to anticipate future forms of (post-hierarchical) political organization. The question, then, is how – in the lack of the organs of the State or the mass media – are these forms of political organization to propagate?[5]

Besides problems with the anti-institutionalist strategy of some of the Occupiers, I also have reservations concerning the type of discourse in which their protest is articulated. It is commendable to give voice to the outrage against the financial system, but this must be done in a political way, targeting the ideological, economic and political forces that structure this system. Otherwise there is a real danger that the current protests will operate in the register of morality, on the basis of a good/bad dichotomy.

It is certainly positive that Occupy, in contrast to the *Indignados*, has a clearly defined adversary: Wall Street, the London Stock Exchange, and other financial institutions. Yet, I find their slogan 'We are the 99%' rather unsatisfactory. It might be rousing, but it reveals a lack of awareness about the wide range of antagonisms existing in society and a rather naïve belief in the possibility of installing a consensual society, once the 'bad' 1% have been eliminated. This

5 Mark Fisher, 'Indirect Action: Some misgivings about horizontalism', *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, ed. Pascal Gielen, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2013, 107.

kind of reasoning could easily lead to a moralistic condemnation of the rich, instead of a political analysis of the complex configuration of power forces that need to be challenged to create a more just and democratic society. In addition to being too inclusive, this slogan also seems to take for granted the pre-given unit of the 'we'. It obviates the necessary process of constructing this 'we' through the articulation of a chain of equivalences among the manifold protests. This moment of constructing a collective will across differences is, I contend, the crucial political step without which no adequate strategy can be designed.

It has been argued that the absence of real political strategy among the movements calling for a consensual 'real democracy' shows that they are still envisaging politics under a liberal framework, preventing them from apprehending the nature of the political. This is the claim made by Jason Hickel, who declares that the shortcomings of Occupy and its inability to have any real impact in undermining neo-liberal patterns of capitalist accumulation comes from the fact that 'the assumptions and subjectivities that organise liberalism continue to operate in the Occupy movement.'[6] Analyzing the hallmarks of the movements, Hickel brings to light the way they are informed by liberal ideology. He says that Occupy's structure of non-hierarchical, consensus-based participatory democracy takes the liberal ethic of celebrating diversity and tolerance to its extreme, and that this prevents them from apprehending the nature of power in capitalist societies and the fact of hegemony. Moreover, he sees an anti-political attitude and 'the liberal ethic in full force' in their refusal to organise around specific demands, so as not to alienate those who might disagree and discourage diversity.

6 Jason Hickel, 'Liberalism and the politics of Occupy Wall Street', *Anthropology of this century* 4, 2012. Available at eprints.lse.ac.uk.

We can find another point of convergence between those movements and the liberal approach in their demonizing of the state, which is a central feature of the neo-liberal zeitgeist. In their repeated attempts to dismantle the institutions created by the social-democratic welfare state, neo-liberal advocates have consistently employed a virulent anti-state rhetoric, denigrating everything related to the state as intrinsically authoritarian (when not totalitarian) and inimical to the liberty of the individual. By mobilizing a binary rhetoric celebrating the virtues of the free market against the oppressive state, they have been able to justify the primacy of the market and the commodification of all social realms, thereby establishing the bases of neo-liberal hegemony.

As we have seen in my critique of the post-operaist theorists in chapter 4, such a negative attitude with respect to the state is also found in some left radical sectors. This convergence can be explained by a shared belief in the availability of a self-regulating society beyond division and beyond hegemony. Of course, such a society is envisaged very differently by neo-liberals and by radicals. While the former deny the reality of existing power relations, the latter announce the coming of a society where power will have disappeared. Nonetheless, what we find in both versions is a common refusal of the political in its antagonistic dimension and of the constitutive role of power. How could one, without eluding the fact that social relations are always power relations, pretend with John Holloway that it is possible 'to make the revolution without taking power'.

The 'horizontalist' protest movements also partake of the anti-state neo-liberal rhetoric. They celebrate the 'common' over the market, but their rejection of the 'public' and all the institutions linked to the state displays uncanny similarities with the neo-liberal attitude. Their insistence in seeing the state as a monolithic entity instead of a complex set of relations, dynamic and traversed by contradictions, precludes them from recognizing the multiple possibilities for struggling against the commodification of society that controlling state institutions could offer.

AN AGONISTIC APPROACH

I would like to propose a different interpretation of the current mobilizations. In *On the Political*, where I criticized the prevalent 'post-political' trend, my diagnosis was that we were witnessing a crisis of representation as a consequence of the 'consensus at the centre' that had come to dominate politics in most liberal-democratic societies. This consensus, which is the result of the unchallenged hegemony of neo-liberalism, deprives democratic citizens of an agonistic debate where they can make their voices heard and choose between real alternatives.

Until recently, it was mainly through right-wing populist parties that people were able to vent their anger against such a post-political situation. With the recent protests, we are seeing the emergence of other, much more estimable ways of reacting against the democratic deficit that characterizes our 'post-democratic' societies. But in both cases, what is at stake is a profound dissatisfaction with the existing order. If so many people, not only among the youth but across the whole population, are now taking to the street, it is because they have lost faith in traditional parties and they feel that their voices cannot be heard through traditional political channels. As one of the mottos of the protesters claims, 'We have a vote, but we do not have a voice'.

Understood as refusal of the post-political order, I suggest that current protests can be read as a call for a radicalization of

liberal democratic institutions, not for their rejection. What they demand are better, more inclusive forms of representation. To satisfy their desire for a 'voice', existing representative institutions have to be transformed and new ones established, so as to create the conditions for an agonistic confrontation where the citizens would be offered real alternatives. Such a confrontation requires the emergence of a genuine left able to offer an alternative to the social liberal consensus dominant in centre-left parties.

The case of Greece can, I think, serve as an illustration of such an approach. There, the popular mobilizations are currently led by Syriza, a coalition of several left parties whose objective is to come to power through elections in order to implement a set of radical reforms. Their aim is clearly not the demise of liberal democratic institutions, but their transformation to make them a vehicle for the expression of popular demands.

The French situation also provides interesting elements for reflection. It has often been noted that, in contrast to many other European countries, the Occupy movement was almost nonexistent in France. Some people have tried to explain this supposed anomaly by the fact that austerity measures were not as drastic there as in other countries and the level of unemployment was not as high. But then why did we see several Occupy camps in Germany, where economic conditions are better?

To look for an economic explanation is to miss the deeper causes, which are political. I am not suggesting that the French do not have serious grounds for protest, but most of them seem to believe that significant political channels are still available for expressing their demands. No doubt, a consensus at the centre between centre-right and centre-left parties has also been installed in France, but the belief in the power of

politics to change things has not waned like in other European countries. This is due to the existence on the left of the Socialist Party and several other groups with a more radical agenda. The ability, for instance, of Jean-Luc Mélanchon, the candidate of the Front de Gauche – a coalition of several left parties – to mobilize the youth in the 2012 presidential elections was remarkable. Many young people, who in other countries would have been found in Occupy camps or would have remained sceptical about political involvement, felt that there was a place for their demands in the programme of the Front de Gauche. They participated with great enthusiasm in Mélanchon's campaign for a 'citizen revolution'.

I do not want to paint too optimistic a picture of the situation in France. One should not forget the riots in the suburbs in 2005, when young people went on a rampage for several days as a reaction to acts of police violence. They set fire to vehicles and destroyed public buildings, including schools and sport centres. Several pundits immediately tried to frame those events in religious or ethnic terms, concluding that they expressed a rejection of French society and values by Muslim immigrants. However, empirical studies later revealed the very mixed origin of the rioters, whose only common characteristic was their youth and the fact that they were unemployed and convinced that they had no future.

What surprised many observers was that their revolt looked like a sheer expression of blind violence without any specific claims. The rioters had so little faith in politics that they did not even formulate any demands. I think that this can be explained by the fact that no discourse was available for them to politically articulate their anger. It could only be expressed through violence.

A similar episode happened in Greece in December 2008, when groups of young people engaged in several days of

rioting. The riots began in Athens, in the alternative district of Exarchia. They too were a response to police violence and quickly spread to a number of other cities. In the Greek case also, there were no political demands, only violence.

Examined from an agonistic angle, such episodes confirm that, as I have often argued, when institutional channels do not exist for antagonisms to be expressed in an agonistic way, they are likely to explode into violence. Of course, violence is not the only way in which the youth can manifest their feeling of being neglected by the democratic system. Fortunately, as the Occupiers demonstrate, the rejection of the system can also take other forms that point towards an enrichment of democracy. In both cases, however, the lesson is the same. There are sectors of the youth population whose interests are not taken into account by the current system of representation, and it is high time to find spaces within the liberal democratic framework for them to articulate their claims in a political way. This is what the Front de Gauche in France and Syriza in Greece are already trying to do, and it is to be hoped that events like those of 2005 and 2008 will not occur again in those countries.

To be sure, the problem is not limited to the youth. There are also important popular sectors whose interests are being ignored by the traditional democratic parties. In previous writings, scrutinizing the growth of right-wing populist parties, I argued that their success was in great part due to the fact that they were often the only ones addressing the concerns of working-class people. In their move towards the centre, socialist parties have abandoned these people, whose demands they see as 'archaic' and 'retrograde'. The socialist parties now limit themselves to representing the interests of the middle classes.

This is no doubt what explains the success of Marine Le Pen in France and the fact that many French workers now vote for

the Front National. Hopefully this will change because Jean-Luc Mélanchon has understood the problem and the Front de Gauche has undertaken the reconquest of the popular vote.

Mélanchon and Alexis Tsipras, the leader of Syriza, are often accused of being 'populist'. Far from being a ground for critique, this should be seen as a virtue. The aim of a left popular movement should be to mobilize passions towards the construction of a 'people' so as to bring about a progressive 'collective will'. A 'people' can, of course, be constructed in different ways, some of which are incompatible with a left-wing project. It all depends on how the adversary is defined. Whereas for right-wing populism the adversary is identified with immigrants or Muslims, the adversary for a left-wing populist movement should be constituted by the configuration of forces that sustains neo-liberal hegemony.

DEMOCRACY OR REPRESENTATION?

At the centre of the dispute about how to interpret the recent protests lies a very old polemic about the nature of democracy and the role of representation. Two positions confront each other: one sees representative democracy as an oxymoron and argues that a 'real' democracy needs to be a direct or even a 'presentist' one; another claims that far from contradicting democracy, representation is one of its very conditions. This is an issue that I have examined in previous works, and it might be useful to revisit some of these arguments to clarify what is at stake in the current dispute.

In *The Democratic Paradox*, I argued that Western liberal democracy is the articulation of two traditions: liberalism, with its emphasis on liberty and pluralism, and democracy, postulating equality and popular sovereignty. While both of them have important strengths, they are ultimately

irreconcilable, and the history of liberal democracy has been driven by the tension between claims for liberty and claims for equality. What has happened under neo-liberal hegemony is that the liberal component has become so dominant that democratic values have been eviscerated. Several previous democratic advances have been dismantled, and under the motto of 'modernization', core democratic values have been dismissed as 'archaic'.

Without underestimating the serious shortcomings of social democracy, it is clear that the situation has drastically worsened under neo-liberal hegemony. The democratic value of equality has been set aside, conveniently replaced by 'choice' in the discourse of the 'third way' and its social-liberal avatars. It is really regrettable that so many parties on the centre-left are ready to accommodate themselves to what has rightly been described as a 'post-democratic' condition.

There are alternatives, however, and we should not accept the current situation as the final way of articulating liberalism and democracy. The experience of progressive governments in South America in the last decade proves that it is possible to challenge neo-liberalism and to re-establish the priority of democratic values without relinquishing liberal representative institutions. It also shows that the state, far from being an obstacle to democratic advances, can in fact be an important vehicle for fostering popular demands.

The recent 'citizen awakening' in Europe and in the US is very encouraging because it breaks with the post-political consensus. A taboo has been broken and many voices are now being heard, contesting the inequalities existing in our societies. To effectively challenge neo-liberal hegemony, it is crucial, however, that all the energies that have erupted are not diverted towards the wrong channels. I am afraid that this is what could happen if representative institutions become

the main target of the protests. There is no denying that representative institutions are in crisis in their current liberal democratic form, but I do not believe that the solution resides in the establishment of a 'non-representative' democracy, or that extra-parliamentary struggles are the only vehicle for making democratic advances.

Such views are popular because they chime with the idea, fashionable among sectors of the left, that the Multitude could auto-organize itself, avoiding taking power and becoming the state. To find such an anti-political approach among activists involved in the various movements of the outraged is worrying because it forecloses the possibility of designing an adequate strategy for their struggle. When representation is seen as the problem, the aim cannot be to engage with current institutions to make them more representative and more accountable; the aim is to discard them entirely. The objective of the movements can be visualized as an 'exodus' from given forms of democracy, on the ground that attempting to transform existing institutions is futile and that representative democracy has to be relinquished.

Many among those who reject representation identify representative democracy with its current 'post-democratic' form and with the actual workings of the parliamentary system. They do not see that the problem concerns the way representative institutions function at the moment, when so many voices are excluded from representation.

What needs to be challenged is the lack of alternatives offered to citizens, not the very idea of representation. A pluralist democratic society cannot exist without representation. To begin with, as the anti-essentialist approach has made clear, identities are never already given, but always produced through discursive construction; this process of construction *is* a process of representation. It is through representation that

collective political subjects are created, and they do not exist beforehand. Every assertion of a political identity is thereby interior, not exterior, to the process of representation.

Secondly, in a democratic society where pluralism is not envisaged in the harmonious anti-political form and where the ever-present possibility of antagonism is taken into account, representative institutions, by giving form to the division of the *demos*, play a crucial role in allowing for the institutionalization of this conflictual dimension. However, such a role can only be fulfilled through the availability of an agonistic confrontation. Otherwise, the electoral system, unable to offer a choice between real alternatives, only serves to entrench the existing hegemony. What constitutes the central problem with our current post-political model is the absence of such agonistic confrontation. This cannot be remedied through 'horizontalist' practices that elude the moment of the political.

I would like to make clear that my critique of 'horizontalism' does not imply that these practices do not have a role to play in an agonistic democracy. I am convinced that the variety of extra-parliamentary struggles and the multiple forms of activism outside traditional institutions are valuable for enriching democracy. Not only can they raise important questions and bring to the fore issues that are neglected, they can also lead to the emergence of new subjectivities and provide a terrain for the cultivation of different social relations. Moreover, as I argued in chapter 5, this type of activism offers many possibilities for critical artistic practices to develop agonistic modes of intervention. 'Artivist' practices tend to flourish in the public spaces provided by these movements, and they constitute a significant dimension of an agonistic politics.

What I contend, however, is that these practices cannot provide a *substitute* for representative institutions and that it is necessary to establish a synergy between different forms

of intervention. Instead of opposing extra-parliamenary to parliamentary struggle, thereby eschewing the possibility of common action, the objective should be to jointly launch a counter-hegemonic offensive against neo-liberalism. If the protest movements refuse to establish alliances with traditional channels that they deemed as intrinsically impervious to democratic transformation, their radical potential will be drastically weakened.

Amazingly, some activists in Occupy still celebrate the 'horizontalist' experiences in Argentina in 2001, presenting them as the model to follow. They do not seem to realize that the democratic advances that have taken place there, as well as in other South American countries in the last ten years, have been made possible thanks to an articulation that combines extra-parliamentary and parliamentary struggles. These are the experiences from which the European left can learn, and it is high time to stop romanticizing spontaneism and horizontalism.

The call for democracy that is now being voiced in a variety of quarters can only produce lasting effects if the activists involved in these movements, instead of implementing a strategy of withdrawal, accept becoming part of a progressive 'collective will' engaged in a 'war of position' to radicalize democratic institutions and establish a new hegemony.