

**Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?**

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Chantal Mouffe is one of the key political thinkers of our time. Through her astute borrowings and political re-readings of deconstruction, through fieldwork and in collaboration with Ernesto Laclau, Mouffe's work has been shaping Left politics. In this lecture presented at the Institute for Contemporary Dance based at the Firkin Crane Centre on July 6, 2005, in Cork, Mouffe carefully pieces together her conception of the political, how this relates to public space, hegemony, what she calls 'agonism' (a concept that is gaining more and more currency in politically animated discussion around art) and finally, what role art might play in these questions. She is Professor of Political Theory at the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster in London. Chantal Mouffe's books include *On the Political (Thinking in Action)* (2005), *The Democratic Paradox* (2000), *The Return of the Political* (1993), and with Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985).

This page and following pages: Chantal Mouffe delivering her presentation at the Institute of Choreography and Dance (Firkin Crane) as part of *Cork Caucus*, 2005

There are two very different meanings of ‘the public’ that one can roughly distinguish as public in the sense which in German is referred to as *Öffentlichkeit*, and public as audience, *Publikum*. Both are of interest for the kind of reflection that I want to develop in this lecture. As we will see later, they should be envisaged as the two sides of a process of discursive construction. It is clear, for instance, that through the establishment of certain types of public spaces, artistic practices contribute to the creation of a determined public, a specific audience. Public art is not, according to my approach, art in the public space, but an art that institutes a public space, a space of common action among people. One of the questions that I want to address is, for instance, what kind of public should progressive art institutions try to constitute and what kind of public spaces are needed to that effect?

### The Public as *Öffentlichkeit*

Let’s begin by scrutinising the public as *Öffentlichkeit*. Since I am a political philosopher, this is the theme on which I have more to contribute, but at the end, I will also present some reflections of the public as audience. As *Öffentlichkeit*, the term ‘the public’ is usually opposed to ‘private’ but its meaning differs according to the different contexts in which this opposition public/private is inscribed. We can, broadly speaking, distinguish three main contexts that can be specified on the basis of an opposition:

- 1) *public* – as what is common, general, opposed to private as what is particular and individual;
- 2) *public* – in the sense of publicity, as what is visible and manifest, opposed to private as what is secret;
- 3) *public* – as accessible and open, opposed to private as closed.

Those different meanings are of course related, but they do not overlap; one thing can be public in one of the senses, while not in the others. The contexts are specific and need to be distinguished. Moreover, the forms of articulation between the three senses have varied historically from the time of the Greek *polis*, where the common, the visible and the open were united in constituting the meaning of ‘the public’, to the establishment through the construction of the state of a new type of separation between the public and the private, a separation increasingly undermined by the encroachment of the market in the realm of the public. What interests me in those different uses of ‘the public’ is a reference to democratic politics in the sense of the common, publicity or openness, and it is the aspect that I want to emphasise in the reflections that I will develop, focusing on the idea of the ‘public space’. As far as I am concerned, what is at stake in this debate is the kind of public space that those who want to foster the radical democratic project should try to establish, a space of deliberation and consensus or a space of agonistic confrontation.

## The Public Space

To begin, I need to delineate the theoretical framework that will inform my approach. Its main tenets have been developed in several of my previous works and here I will limit myself to the aspects which are relevant for my argument about 'the public'. Let's start by the distinction I have proposed to make between 'politics' and 'the political'. In ordinary language, it is not very common to speak of 'the political' but I think that such a distinction opens important alleys for reflection and a variety of political theorists are making it. The difficulty, though, is that no agreement exists among them concerning the meaning attributed to the respective terms and that may cause a certain confusion. Commonalities exist, however, which can provide some points of orientation. For instance, to make this distinction suggests a difference between two types of approach, political science, which deals with the empirical field of 'politics', and political theory, which is the domain of philosophers who enquire not about facts of 'politics' but about the essence of 'the political'. If we wanted to express such a distinction in a philosophical way, we could, borrowing the vocabulary of Heidegger, say that politics refers to the 'ontic' level, while 'the political' has to do with the 'ontological' one. This means that the ontic has to do with the manifold practices of conventional politics, while the ontological concerns the very way in which society is symbolically instituted.

But this still leaves the possibility of a lot of disagreement about what constitutes 'the political', and that has important consequences for the way 'the public' is envisaged. Some theorists, like Hannah Arendt, envisage the political as a space of freedom and public deliberation, while others see it as a space of power, conflict and antagonism. My understanding of 'the political' clearly belongs to the second perspective. More precisely, this is how I distinguish between 'the political' and 'politics': by 'the political' I refer to the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I refer to the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organising human coexistence in the context of conflicts provided by the political.

## The Political as Antagonism

I want to take as a point of departure for my reflection about the public space, our current incapacity to envisage the problems facing our societies in a *political* way. Political questions are not mere technical issues to be solved by experts. Properly, political questions always involve decisions which require a choice between conflicting alternatives. This incapacity to think 'politically' is, to a great extent, due to the uncontested hegemony of liberalism. 'Liberalism', in the way I use the term in the present context, refers to a philosophical discourse with many variants, united not by a common essence but by a multiplicity of what Wittgenstein calls 'family resemblances'. There are, to be sure, many liberalisms, some more progressive

than others, but save for a few exceptions (Isaiah Berlin, Joseph Raz, John Gray, and Michael Walzer among others), the dominant tendency in liberal thought is characterised by a rationalist and individualist approach which is unable to adequately grasp the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails; conflicts for which no rational solution could ever exist, hence the dimension of antagonism that characterises human societies. The typical liberal understanding of pluralism is that we live in a world in which there are, indeed, many perspectives and values and that, due to empirical limitations, we will never be able to adopt them all, but that, when put together, they constitute a harmonious and non-conflicting ensemble. This is why this type of liberalism must negate the political in its antagonistic dimension. Indeed, one of the main tenets of this liberalism is the rationalist belief in the availability of a universal consensus based on reason. No wonder that the political constitutes its blind spot. Liberalism has to negate antagonism since, by bringing to the fore the inescapable moment of decision – in the strong sense of having to decide in an undecidable terrain – what antagonism reveals is the very limit of any rational consensus.

When we examine the different perspectives existing within contemporary liberal thought, we can single out two main paradigms. The first one, sometimes called ‘aggregative’, envisages politics as the establishment of a compromise between competing forces in society. Individuals are portrayed as rational beings, driven by the maximisation of their own interests and as acting in the political world in a basically instrumental way. It is the idea of the market applied to the domain of politics, which is apprehended with concepts borrowed from economics. The other paradigm, the ‘deliberative’ one, developed in reaction against this instrumentalist model, aims at creating a link between morality and politics. Its advocates want to replace instrumental rationality by communicative rationality. They present political debate as a specific field of application of morality and believe that it is possible to create, in the realm of politics, a rational moral consensus by means of free discussion. In this case, politics is not apprehended through economics but through ethics or morality. In both cases, what is left aside by this rationalist approach, be it on the mode of instrumental rationality or communicative rationality, is the crucial role played in the field of politics by what I call ‘passions’, the affective dimension which is central to the constitution of collective forms of identification, identifications without which it is impossible to grasp the construction of political identities. Political identities are always collective identities and this is another reason why liberalism with its methodological individualism is unable to grasp the specificity of the political. In politics, we are always dealing with a ‘we’ opposed to a ‘them’ and, as I will show in a moment, this is why antagonism cannot be eliminated.

I contend that it is only when we acknowledge ‘the political’ in its antagonistic dimension that we can pose the central question for democratic politics. This question, *pace* liberal theorists, is not how to negotiate a com-

promise among competing interests, nor is it how to reach a 'rational', i.e. fully inclusive consensus, a consensus without any exclusion. Despite what many liberals want us to believe, the specificity of democratic politics is not the overcoming of the 'we/them' opposition, but the different way in which it is established. What democracy requires is drawing the 'we/them' discrimination in a way compatible with the recognition of the pluralism that is constitutive of modern democracy.

In developing this point, I have found the notion of the 'constitutive outside' particularly useful because it unveils what is at stake in the constitution of identity. This term has been proposed by Henry Staten to refer to a number of themes developed by Jacques Derrida around notions like 'supplement', 'trace' and 'difference'. The aim is to highlight the fact that the creation of an identity always implies the establishment of a difference, difference which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy, for example between form and matter, black and white, man and women, etc. Once we have understood that every identity is relational and that the affirmation of a difference is a precondition for the existence of any identity, i.e. the perception of something 'other' which constitutes its 'exterior', we can understand why politics is concerned with the constitution of a 'we' which can only exist by the demarcation of a 'them'. This does not mean of course that such a relation is necessarily one of friend/enemy, i.e. an antagonistic one.



But we should realise that, in certain conditions, there is always the possibility that this ‘we/them’ relation can *become* antagonistic. This happens when the ‘them’ is perceived as putting into question the identity of the ‘we’ and as threatening its existence. From that moment on, as the case of the disintegration of Yugoslavia testifies, any form of ‘we/them’ relations, be it religious, ethnic, economic or other, becomes the locus of an antagonism.

Let’s draw a first theoretical conclusion from the previous reflections. What we can assert at this stage is that the ‘we/them’ distinction, which is the condition of possibility of formation of political identities, can always become the locus of an antagonism. Since all forms of political identities entail a ‘we/them’ distinction, this means that the possibility of emergence of antagonism can never be eliminated. It is therefore an illusion to believe in the advent of a society from which antagonism would be eradicated. Antagonism is an ever-present possibility, the political belongs to our ontological condition and, when we envisage the public space, this is something that needs to be taken into account.

## Politics as Hegemony

Next to antagonism, the concept of hegemony is, in my approach, the other key notion for addressing the question of ‘the political’. To acknowledge the dimension of ‘the political’ as the ever-present possibility of antagonism requires coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the ‘undecidability’ which pervades every order. It requires, in other words, recognising the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices attempting at establishing order in a context of contingency. The political is linked to the acts of hegemonic institution. Society is not to be seen as the unfolding of a logic exterior to itself, whatever the source of this logic could be: forces of production, development of the spirit, laws of history, etc. Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Things could always be otherwise and therefore every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. It is in that sense that it can be called ‘political’, since it is the expression of a particular structure of power relations. Power is constitutive of the social because the social could not exist without the power relations through which it is given shape. What is, at a given moment, considered as the ‘natural’ order – jointly with the ‘common sense’ which accompanies it – is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices; it is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity exterior to the practices that bring it into being.

To resume this point, every order is political and based on some form of exclusion. There are always other possibilities that have been repressed and that can be reactivated. The articulatory practices through which a certain order is established and the meaning of social institutions is fixed, are ‘hegemonic practices’. Every hegemonic order is susceptible to being chal-



lenged by counter-hegemonic practices, i.e. practices that will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony.

As far as collective identities are concerned, we find ourselves in a similar situation. Identities are the result of processes of identification, and they can never be completely fixed. We are never confronted with 'we/them' oppositions expressing essentialist identities pre-existing the process of identification. Moreover, since as I have stressed, the 'them' represents the condition of possibility of the 'we', its 'constitutive outside', this means that the constitution of a specific 'we' always depends on the type of 'them' from which it is differentiated. This is a crucial point because it allows us to envisage the possibility of different types of 'we/them' relation according to the way the 'them' is constructed.

### **Which 'we/them' for democratic politics?**

Once the ever-present possibility of antagonism is acknowledged, one can understand why one of the main tasks for democratic politics consists in defusing the potential antagonism that exists in social relations. If we accept that this cannot be done by transcending the 'we/them' relation, but only by constructing it in a different way, then the following question arises: what could constitute a 'tamed' relation of antagonism, what form of 'we/them' would it imply? 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, seeing their demands as illegitimate, which is precisely what happens with the antagonistic friend/enemy relation. However, the opponents cannot be seen simply as competitors whose interests can be dealt with through mere negotiation, or reconciled through deliberation, because in that case the antagonistic element would simply have been eliminated. If we want to acknowledge on one side the permanence of the antagonistic dimension of the conflict, while on the other side allowing for the possibility of its 'taming', we need to envisage a third type of relation. This is the type of relation which I have proposed to call 'agonism'. While antagonism is a 'we/them' relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a 'we/them' relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognise the legitimacy of their opponents. They are *adversaries*, not enemies. This means that, while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place.

What is at stake in the agonistic struggle is the very configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured, it is a struggle between opposing hegemonic projects which can never be reconciled rationally. The antagonistic dimension is always present; it is a real confron-

tation but one which is played out under conditions regulated by a set of democratic procedures accepted by the adversaries. An agonistic conception of democracy acknowledges the contingent character of the hegemonic politico-economic articulations that determine the specific configuration of a society at a given moment. They are precarious and pragmatic constructions that can be disarticulated and transformed as a result of the agonistic struggle among the adversaries. Contrary to the various liberal models, the agonistic approach that I am advocating recognises that society is always politically instituted and never forgets that the terrain in which hegemonic interventions take place is always the outcome of previous hegemonic practices and that it is never a neutral one. This is why it denies the possibility of a non-adversarial democratic politics and criticises those who, by ignoring the dimension of ‘the political’, reduce politics to a set of supposedly technical moves and neutral procedures.

## The Public Space

It is time now to examine what are the consequences of the agonistic model of democratic politics that I have just delineated for envisaging the public space. The most important consequence is that it challenges the widespread conception that, albeit in different ways, informs most visions of the public space conceived as the terrain where consensus can emerge. For the agonistic model, on the contrary, the public space is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation. I have spoken so far of the public space, but I need to specify straight away that we are not dealing here with one single space. According to the agonistic approach, public spaces are always plural and the agonistic confrontation takes place in a multiplicity of discursive surfaces. I also want to insist on a second important point. While there is no underlying principle of unity, no predetermined *centre* to this diversity of spaces, there always exist diverse forms of articulation among them and we are not faced with the kind of dispersion envisaged by some postmodernist thinkers. Nor are we dealing with the kind of ‘smooth’ space found in Deleuze and his followers. Public spaces are always striated and hegemonically structured. A given hegemony results from a specific articulation of a diversity of spaces and this means that the hegemonic struggle also consists in the attempt to create a different form of articulation among public spaces.

My approach is therefore clearly very different from the one defended by Jürgen Habermas who, when he envisages the political public space (which he calls the ‘public sphere’), presents it as the place where deliberation 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, according to the perspective

that I am advocating, the impediments to the Habermasian ideal speech situation are not empirical but ontological and the rational consensus that he presents as a regulative idea is in fact a conceptual impossibility. Indeed, it would require the availability of a consensus without exclusion, of a 'we' without a 'them', which is precisely what I have shown is impossible.

To make my argument about the impossibility of such a rational consensus, I have referred to Derrida and the constitutive outside, but I could also have reached the same conclusion with the help of different thinkers. We can, for instance, also use Wittgenstein's insights to undermine Habermas' conception of procedures and the very idea of a neutral or rational dialogue. For Wittgenstein, to have agreement in opinions, there must first be agreement on the language used, and this, as he points out, implies agreement in forms of life. According to him, procedures only exist as a complex ensemble of practices. Those practices constitute specific forms of individuality and identity that make possible the allegiance to the procedures. It is because they are inscribed in shared forms of life and agreements in judgments that procedures can be accepted and followed. They cannot be seen as rules, created on the basis of principles, and then applied to specific cases. Rules for Wittgenstein are always abridgments of practices; they are inseparable from specific forms of life. Therefore, distinctions between 'procedural' and 'substantial' or between 'moral' and 'ethical', which are central to the Habermasian approach, cannot be maintained.

Still another way to problematise the very possibility of the notion of the 'ideal speech situation' conceived as the asymptotic ideal of inter-subjective communication, free of constraints and where the participants arrive at consensus by means of rational argumentation, is following the lead of Slavoj Žižek, through Lacan. Indeed, a Lacanian approach reveals how discourse itself, in its fundamental structure, is authoritarian, since out of the free-floating dispersion of signifiers, it is only through the intervention of a master signifier that a consistent field of meaning can emerge. For Lacan the status of the master signifier, the signifier of symbolic authority, founded only on itself, is strictly transcendental: the gesture that 'distorts' a symbolic field, that 'curves' its space by introducing a non-founded violence, is *stricto sensu* correlative to its very establishment. This means that, if we were to subtract, from a discursive field, its distortion, the field would disintegrate, it would 'de-quilt' to speak in Lacanese. This clearly undermines the very basis of the Habermasian view, according to which the inherent pragmatic pre-suppositions of discourse are non-authoritarian since they imply the idea of a communication free of constraints where only rational argumentation counts.

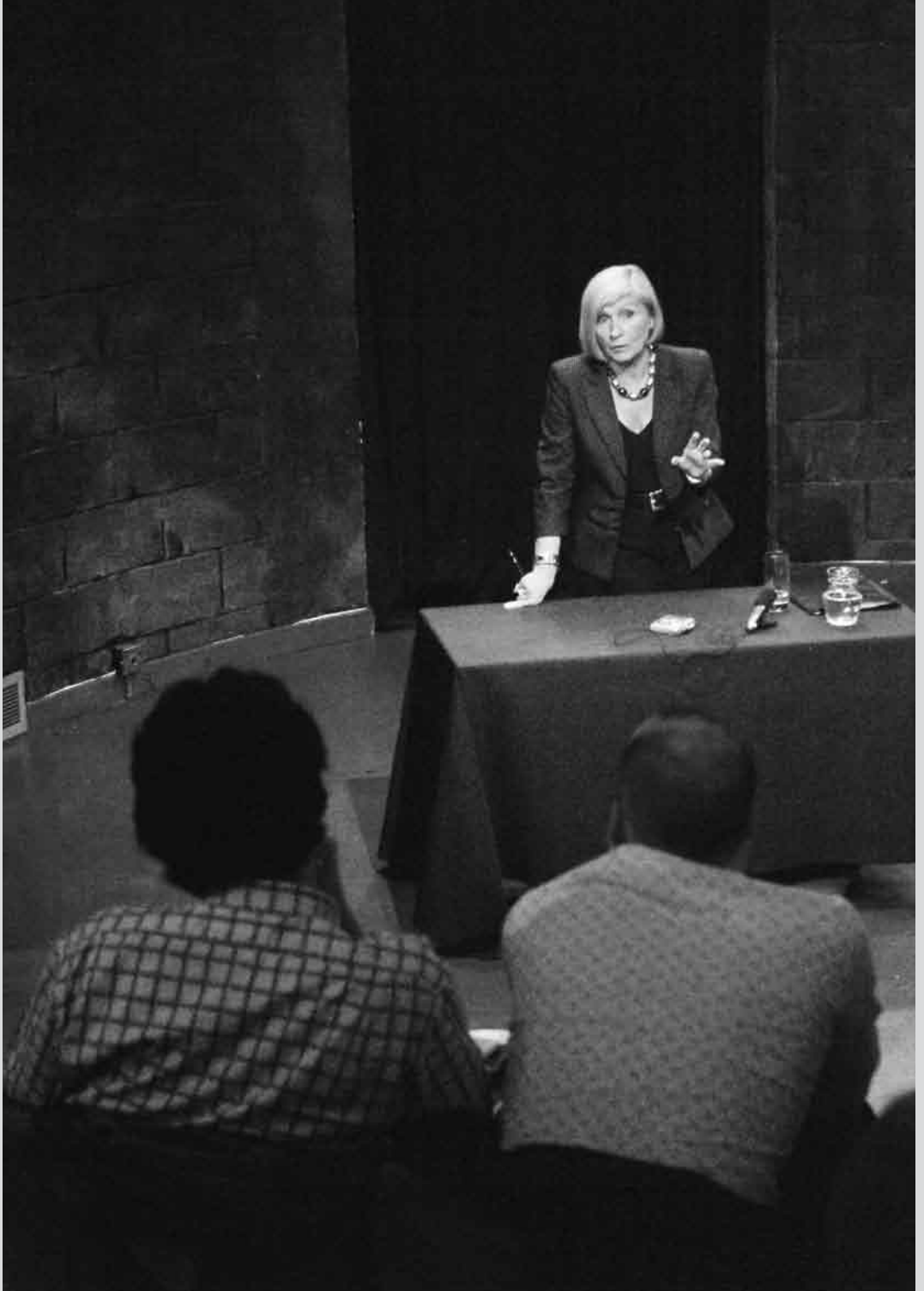
I also want to indicate that, despite the similar terminology, my conception of the agonistic public space also differs from the one of Hannah Arendt, which has become so popular recently. In my view, the main problem with the Arendtian understanding of 'agonism' is that, to put it in a nutshell,

it is an 'agonism without antagonism'. What I mean is that while Arendt puts great emphasis on human plurality and insists that politics deals with the community and reciprocity of human beings that are different, she never acknowledges that this plurality is at the origin of antagonistic conflicts. According to her, to think politically is to develop the ability to see things from a multiplicity of perspectives. As her reference to Kant and his idea of 'enlarged thought' testifies, her pluralism is not fundamentally different from the liberal one because it is inscribed in the horizon of an inter-subjective agreement. Indeed, what she looks for in Kant's doctrine of aesthetic judgment is a procedure for ascertaining inter-subjective agreement in the public space. Despite significant differences between their respective approaches, Arendt ends up, like Habermas, envisaging the public space in a consensual way. To be sure, in her case, the consensus results from the exchange of voices and opinions (in the Greek sense of *doxa*), not from a rational *Diskurs* as in Habermas. While for Habermas consensus emerges through what Kant calls *Disputieren*, an exchange of arguments constrained by logical rules, for Arendt it is a question of *Streiten*, where agreement is produced through persuasion, not irrefutable proofs. However, neither of them is able to acknowledge the hegemonic nature of every form of consensus and the ineradicability of antagonism, the moment of what Lyotard refers to as the *differend*. It is symptomatic that, despite finding their inspiration in different aspects of Kant's philosophy, both Arendt and Habermas have in common the privileging of the beautiful in Kant's aesthetic, while ignoring his reflection on the sublime. This is no doubt related to their avoidance of the *differend*.

## The Public as *Publikum*

Now I would like to share with you some thoughts concerning the relation between the public space and the other meaning of the public as 'audience'. It is clear that we are not dealing with two pre-constituted entities facing each other but that there exists a relation of mutual implication. The very identity of a given public space is a function of its public, and reciprocally the identity of the public is at stake in the way the public space is constructed. Since I am focusing here on the political aspect of this relation, the question I would like to address concerns the implications of this discursive construction for the political role that progressive critical arts practices could play.

I want to stress at the outset that when I think about the relation between art and politics, I do not see it in terms of two separately constituted fields, art on one side and politics on the other, between which a relation would need to be established. There is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art. This is why I never speak of 'political art' because I consider that one cannot make a distinction between political and non-political art. From the point of view of the theory of he-



gemony, artistic practices play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order or its challenging and this is why they necessarily have a political dimension. The political, for its part, concerns the symbolic ordering of social relations, what Claude Lefort calls the *mise en scène*, the *mise en forme* of human coexistence, and this is where lies its aesthetic dimension.

The real issue concerns the possible forms of *critical art*, the different ways in which artistic practices can contribute to the questioning of the dominant hegemony. Once we accept that identities are never pre-given but that they are always the result of processes of identification, that they are discursively constructed, the question that arises is the type of identity that critical artistic practices should aim at fostering. Clearly those who advocate the creation of agonistic public spaces, where the objective is to unveil all that is repressed by the dominant consensus, are going to envisage the relation between artistic practices and their public in a very different way than those whose objective is the creation of consensus, even if this consensus is seen as a critical one. I am, for this reason, very suspicious of the current tendency to promote 'commemorative' art because, even when the intention is a critical one, it tends to impose one accepted way of seeing things, instead of opening up the debate and facilitating an agonistic confrontation. According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissent; that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. I do not think, however, that critical art only consists in manifestations of refusal, that it should be the expression of an absolute negation, a testimony of the 'intractable' and 'unrepresentable'. We witness today a certain infatuation with the 'sublime', which leads to dismissals of the importance of proposing new modes of coexistence, of contributing to the construction of new forms of collective identities. There is too much emphasis on 'dis-identification' at the expense of 're-identification'. This perspective, while claiming to be very radical, remains trapped within a very deterministic framework according to which the negative gesture is, in itself, enough to bring about the emergence of a new form of subjectivity; as if this subjectivity was already latent, ready to emerge as soon as the weight of the dominant ideology would have been lifted. Such a conception is, in my view, completely anti-political. It fails to come to terms with the nature of the hegemonic struggle and the manifold practices, discourses and language games through which identities are constituted. I am convinced that it is only by recognising the need for a plurality of forms of interventions, taking place in a variety of public spaces, that critical artistic practices can contribute to the constitution of a variety of agonistic spaces where a radical and plural conception of democracy could be fostered.

## Discussion

The discussion following Chantal Mouffe's presentation was led and moderated by Ashley Hunt and Simon Sheikh.

**Simon Sheikh:** The first question would be about 'counter-publics'?

**Chantal Mouffe:** I think the problem with the idea of 'counter-publics' as it is used by Kluge and Negt as well as some others is that it remains very much in the terrain in which Habermas has developed his notion of the public sphere. They criticise Habermas but without challenging his premises. They basically accept that there is a public sphere but they argue for the need to envisage counter-publics. I have some sympathy for their critique, but if you think as I do, in terms of a multiplicity of public spaces, all of which are articulated differently, then you do not need the idea of the counter-public any more. What I am putting into question in my works is the very notion of the 'public sphere' as put forward by Habermas. I want to think in a different way. In my conception, the function that Kluge and Negt are giving to the counter-public is reformulated and reconceived. It's not that I disagree with them but that I express a similar idea differently, because I have abandoned the terrain in which the approach of Habermas is grounded.

**Simon:** Which then, I think, brings up this whole question of the market on the other hand. If on the one hand we have this kind of critique from the Left, so to speak, of the Habermasian model. We have a critique that was not even a critique but an implementation from the Right which is the market, that even Habermas said, "If there wasn't a market, things would be fine". If there wasn't commercialisation, then his model would work, he claims – in a nutshell. But the Left has, of course, been much more effective and widespread since he wrote his book four years ago.

So I am thinking, what kind of spatialisations do we need to produce to create any kind of 'publicness', not necessarily in the Habermasian sense, but if we see that public spaces are not only pluralised but also commercialised to a large extent. And there, I think, maybe ...

**Chantal:** But in that case, they are not public spaces in my conception if they are commercialised. You see, if they are truly agonistic they cannot be commercialised. If they are commercialised they are not agonistic, in my sense. If you go to New York today, for instance, you see 'public space' written on every corner. As someone explained to me, when you build a new building you are required to have a public space. Those public spaces are in fact private. Of course, they are public in the sense that people can go there and sit and buy a coffee, but it is a complete travesty of what is a public space. This is not a public space: it is just something very private that goes by the name of public space. But what was the question?

**Simon:** The question was: Where, then, do we find these public spaces if we want them to be agonistic? Where will their physical, spatial formation be?



**C**hantal: But they do not need to be physical, they might be virtual too. An agonistic public space does not need to be geographically located. For example, you can create an agonistic form of discussion through the Internet or in many other forms. Space does not need to refer to geographical location. We could say that it is a way to establish a form of communication among people, but that can be done in different ways. It can be done by putting them together in a specific place; it can be done through the press. In fact, I would think, the press would be a very important area to act within, particularly in view of its privatisation and domination by people like Rupert Murdoch, etc. An important question is how to create a type of press that could really be a locus for this kind of agonistic discussion, where new proposals would be made. We need to envisage a plurality of spaces where an agonistic discussion can take place.

**A**shley Hunt: So, would you say, then, that spaces like that already exist? For instance, local communities, where different communities live and share a common space, have ways in which they deal with certain needs they all have that are mutually exclusive, and have already found ways of doing that, but that are not visible within a larger hegemonic order. Is our work to find spaces that already exist, or are we starting from scratch?

**C**hantal: No, of course we are not starting from scratch. For instance, the social forum in Porto Alegre<sup>1</sup> – that is an example of what I understand as an agonistic public space. There, people really meet. But also around that, there is a whole thing that is created. So it is not only what happens when people meet there, but the repercussions of meeting. This is an example, but there are others. I think that it is also very important to intervene in the traditional domain of politics. If I insist so much on the need to re-vivify the idea of the Left and the distinction between Left and Right, it is because I think an agonistic struggle requires those conflicting views. In fact, the field of traditional democratic politics could and should become an agonistic public space. It is not at the moment, because social democratic parties are unable to envisage an alternative to the neo-liberal order. This is however a crucial terrain for the very possibility of an agonistic politics.

I am convinced that we cannot leave the terrain of traditional politics and say “this is a lost cause”. We need to act in a multiplicity of areas, in each of which it is important to re-inject the possibility for conflict.

The ‘consensus at the centre’ which some people celebrate nowadays is a false consensus that impedes us from seeing conflicts as being legitimate. The expression used by Blairite New Labour to refer to critiques of this consensus is ‘under the radar’. It’s not even worth considering. Tony Blair declares for instance that ‘we are all middle-class’, and views which are different are not even worth considering. They refuse to enter into discussion with people who disagree. One of the consequences of the imposition of this

1 / The World Social Forum held in Brazil in 2005.



consensus of the centre is the multiplication of violent forms of resistance because the channels for legitimate disagreement are so limited. If we had a really agonistic politics, different voices would be able to express themselves within the democratic framework.

It is also as a consequence of the lack of an agonistic political public sphere that I explain the development of right-wing populism in so many countries. The success of those parties is a consequence of the consensus of the centre. When there are no channels within democratic politics to express your demands, and when traditional parties claim that there is no alternative, then people are going to be attracted by demagogues who claim that an alternative is possible.

I also have a theory concerning the development of the new forms of terrorism, but maybe you do not want to enter into this terrain. In a nutshell, I could say that here again the problem is the lack of an agonistic discussion. People all over the world are told that the only way to become democratic is to accept the Western model. No wonder that their resistance takes extreme forms.

**T**om Curtin: Do you see this antagonistic view as needing any restraints or constraints on it? It seems a thin line, since you can equate antagonism with conflict or with confrontation.

**C**hantal: Antagonism is a conflict that has no possible rational solution, but this conflict can take two forms: it can express itself in the form of what we can call antagonism, strictly speaking, which is the 'friendly enemy' relation, or it can take the form of what I call agonism. An agonism is also a conflict without any rational solution, but a conflict which is going to be played out in a different way because the people who are in conflict see themselves not as enemies but as adversaries. This means that, while disagreeing, they accept the legitimacy of the demands of their opponents.

**T**om: So it needs a certain consensus?

**C**hantal: Yes, it needs what I call a 'conflictual consensus'. We need to accept a common symbolic framework, but within this symbolic framework, of course, there is room for disagreement. Let me give you an example of what I mean by that. The common symbolic framework of modern pluralist democracy is the expression of 'liberty and equality for all'. Those are its 'ethico-political principles'. Citizens in a pluralist democracy need to agree that those are the principles that are going to inform their coexistence. But, of course, those shared principles can be interpreted in many different ways. After all, what is liberty? What is equality? And who belongs to this 'all'? There are many different interpretations of this last term alone, and we should accept the legitimacy of those different interpretations.

The struggle among adversaries is the struggle among people who undertake to organise their common life according to those principles. But radical democrats will interpret them in one way, social democrats in another way, neo-liberals in still another way. This is what the agonistic con-

frontation should be about: each position trying to win hegemony. But if it were a struggle between enemies, then things would be completely different, because then each group would attempt to eradicate the other. They wouldn't accept that their interpretation is also legitimate. I think that this distinction is important to pose the question of tolerance in an adequate way.

There is a lot of discussion in political theory around tolerance. What does tolerance mean? Does tolerance imply that we have to accept or tolerate things with which we disagree profoundly? Adversaries do not need to accept ideas they disagree with, they will fight against them, but they have to accept that it is legitimate for other people to put forward such ideas and defend them. This is the type of tolerance which is necessary in a democracy. What I would stress is that such a position requires accepting that there will never be one single, right interpretation of the ethico-political principles. This is very important for the Left. On this point, I have definitely evolved. I used to believe that there was one correct interpretation and that 'we', the Left, had it. We had to impose it. Now, I think that this is wrong. Of course, we are going to fight in order to win hegemony and radicalise democracy, but we can't start with the conviction that we are in possession of the truth, or that we have the right interpretation. In the field of politics there is no 'right' interpretation. Many political theorists, for instance, are spending an incredible amount of energy and time elaborating what is the 'true' conception of 'equality'. They believe that if one is really going to be sophisticated enough, one could find the 'true' conception of 'equality', but I do not think that there is such a 'true' conception of 'equality'. There will always be competing conceptions of equality and we have to acknowledge this.

**Simon:** It would be good to return to this question of the 'democratic paradox'. There is something I want to add to this, but maybe also we could discuss this idea of a society that is a community vis-à-vis Agamben. First, however, there is a question from John.

**John Byrne:** Yes, it was actually a connected question and quite a specific one. I was wondering about your use of Jean-Francois Lyotard, and I was wondering if Lyotard's 'sublime' necessarily leads to a negative act or a negation. Or, does Lyotard's use of the sublime – especially when he is referring to the avant-garde – is not the avant-garde's activity about trying to find a *differend*, trying to find spaces of articulation where you can precisely start to have contestations over democracy?

**Chantal:** Well, with respect to Lyotard, I agree with his idea of the *differend*, this is precisely what I call antagonism. This is one of the points where we both disagree with Habermas. What I'm not so enthusiastic about is the kind of pathos he sometimes uses, for instance when he declares that after Auschwitz the project of modernity has been liquidated. I don't find that very useful. There is a quite interesting critique of Lyotard by Jacques Rancière where he criticises his emphasis on the sublime. I think that the

problem with Lyotard's conception of the avant-garde is that he wants to impose one single model of what can be called 'critical art' as having to do with the sublime, the intractable and the unrepresentable. I find that problematic, because I consider that there is a plurality of ways in which critical art can play a role and not simply by addressing this question of the sublime. Many current critical artistic practices will not fit at all with this model. So then what? Are they not important?

**J**eremiah Day: I was thinking about your analysis of Arendt and I want to thank you because I think that it was very astute. But I think that one of the things that makes Arendt so powerful, at least for me, is also the fact that she actually has a programme, or a possible affirmative model in her analysis of the council. First, I was wondering how you would relate your analysis to that. Second of all, also her theorisation of the councils in particular, can be seen as a practical response, or a preservation of freedom in the face of totalitarianism. And I mean specifically in the context of the United States now where there is clearly massive propaganda, and mass political ideological movements moving towards a single party dictatorship.

**C**hantal: I think this attraction of Arendt for the councils is very romantic. She also has a very elitist conception of democracy, because she would be quite happy with only little pockets of democracy. Her model of democracy is very much the kind of Athenian type of democracy or the civic republican one, and I do not think that is very adaptable to modern democracy. I also find problematic her strong distinction between the social and the political, her claim that politics should not at all be about economics. Further, you say she has a programme, but I don't think she has a programme at all, just nostalgia. Of course she admires Rosa Luxemburg, but it does not fit with the rest of what she is saying. There are certainly a number of things which are interesting in her work, and I can see why people in their artistic practices can use her idea of 'sphere of appearance'. But to have a programme is something else. Do you really believe that one can still, under the present conditions of globalisation, imagine society organised on the basis of the councils?

**J**eremiah: Well, in Argentina it happened spontaneously two years ago.

**C**hantal: Well, I want to tackle this question, because I think that there is a complete romanticisation among certain people of the movement of the Piqueteros in Argentina. In fact, there are two examples of political movements which I think are often completely misinterpreted: one is the Zapatistas, the other is the Piqueteros. Hardt and Negri give the Piqueteros as an example of the kind of politics of exodus that they advocate. In fact, I would argue that the case of the Piqueteros precisely shows the limitations of this kind of spontaneous movement of civil society. Of course, they have managed to create some interesting forms of mobilisation, but when it came to the moment of elections in Argentina they were completely impotent because they didn't want to have a way to intervene within the traditional po-

litical system. Their motto was *Que se vayan todos!*<sup>2</sup> – Get rid of all the politicians. Ok, but how are you going to organise society in that way?

This is why the elections took place within the traditional framework. Fortunately, Kirchner won and turned out to be much more interesting and radical than people could have dreamed of. He has really tried to establish a synergy with the Piqueteros movement. Some of them have agreed to work with him and are having a real influence; some have not, because they do not want to make any kind of compromise with the state, but they are not playing any significant role today. What the example of the Piqueteros shows is the shortcomings of a kind of strategy purely based on civil society, because it is unable to really influence the course of politics when it comes to the moment of establishing a government.

The case of the Zapatistas is of course different, but there is also a profound misunderstanding of the nature of this movement. Hardt and Negri and their followers argue that what is wonderful about the Zapatistas and the new kind of politics they represent is that they do not want to take power. Of course they do not want to take power, because what they want is to have their rights recognised by the Mexican government. They do not want to have a revolution; they do not want to bring down the Mexican state; what they want is to be treated as equal citizens. No doubt such recognition would require a profound transformation of Mexican society. Therefore their struggle is not simply a corporatist one, it has a radical dimension. In my view they provide a good example of a politics of radical democracy. In no way is it a politics of exodus as Hardt and Negri pretend.

**P**aul O’Neill: My question is perhaps a simple one, but maybe I’ll put it in complicated terms. In Ireland we have an expression when, in order to resolve some sort of conflict, we say that “we agree to disagree”. The problem with that is that when you return to the subject of that disagreement there is a continual discordance. And I just wanted to ask about the relationship between the idea of recognition and understanding in relation to concepts of difference. In order to produce one’s subjectivity there is a recognition of oneself in the difference of others – that’s the first stage of subjectivity. The second stage is understanding how different that difference actually is, and in relation to your notion of an antagonistic agreement ...

**C**hantal: I never spoke about antagonistic agreement, what is that?

**P**aul: Well, this idea of a symbolic space where people agree.

**C**hantal: You mean a conflictual consensus. It is not simply to ‘agree to disagree’; it is much more than that. To put it like this flattens it completely. If this were the case it would be exactly the kind of liberal politics that will not allow you to make any radical transformation. But this is not what I am saying. What I am saying is that there must be some kind of commonality. Democratic politics requires that we acknowledge that we are part

2 / Literally translates as ‘let them all be gone’

of a political association. It means that we are going to accept certain rules in order to organise our common life. But, ultimately, agreeing to disagree means that we are going to leave things as they are. There is no attempt to transform the structure of power relations. In an agonistic model, on the contrary, we are going to fight against the existing hegemony, but fight according to certain forms which are accepted as the democratic rules at a given moment. There is a real confrontation between hegemonic projects. So I am not talking about agreeing to disagree at all. No, in this case we want to transform hegemony and the relations of power. This is not at all the liberal view, which does not acknowledge the hegemonic nature of politics. According to the agonistic model there is room for very deep political transformation, for a radicalisation of democracy.

**J**an Verwoert: I am interested in the procedures you have in mind for reaching this agreement on certain democratic rules. I mean, do you see it as a kind of mutual agreement in which different parties enter into contract by their own free will or, given this idea that politics is based on hegemony, would the question be how are these procedures and agreements enforced? Does it not always imply a certain authority that enforces this agreement on democratic rules and that polices these agreements if there are any violations? Does it not always imply that there is some kind of institutional power at stake through which this conflictual consensus, or this codex of respect is enforced?

**C**hantal: Yes. But that does not impede profound hegemonic transformation. The democratic state is not state in which power is enforced from above. Even in the US, which is currently moving into a more authoritarian direction, there is still possibility for dissent. The very institution of democracy allows you to have the possibility of challenging the dominant hegemony. There is a great difference between a democratic state and an authoritarian one. In a democracy the possibility exists to fight for the creation of a different hegemony. What is needed is the political will to do it. Take the case of Britain, for example. The big disappointment with the coming to power of New Labour was that they could have – if they had wanted – really created a profound hegemonic transformation. This is, by the way, what Margaret Thatcher did when she came to power. A hegemonic transformation doesn't necessarily move in a progressive direction. Thatcher managed to destroy the social democratic hegemony that existed in Britain, and she created a new hegemonic terrain through the imposition of neo-liberalism. When New Labour came to power it could have – if it had really been radical – challenged the neo-liberal terrain created by Thatcher. But they did not even try. They kept the terrain of Thatcherism and this is why New Labour is merely Thatcherism with a human face.

There was a missed opportunity, and it's terrible that this happened. This is, of course, the reason why there is so much disappointment, and why people don't want to vote any more. Labour was re-elected for the third

time, on a very low level of participation, because there was no credible alternative.

I am convinced that, if the political will exists, it is always possible within the context of the democratic state to make profound advances. Of course, we are not talking here of revolution, but of a process of radicalisation of democracy. I would like to insist on another point: I am convinced that it is very important to envisage such a radicalisation at a European level. This is why we should foster the creation of European parties, of European public spaces. We need to fight at the European level in order to create a progressive identity, and artistic practices have an important role to play in this context.

It is also a mistake to believe that the democratic state is controlled by the media. This question of the media is very interesting to consider, especially in view of what happened in France with the referendum on the European Constitution. Personally, I was not in favour of the 'No', but its victory proved two things. First, that people become active in politics when they are given the opportunity to really make a difference. The degree of politicisation was amazing. Contrary to what we are told, people are interested in politics, but they need to feel that their intervention is going to make a difference and that they have to choose between real alternatives, not between Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola. Second it proves that the media are not all powerful. Despite the fact that all the big media were for the 'Yes', the 'No' won.

**S**imon: Earlier you referred to what you have called the 'democratic paradox', or the difference between liberty and equality, and I was wondering what the strategic reasons were for leaving out this notion of a fraternity that, of course, Theo Danse has written about in the positive sense. But, for me, it feels that this is maybe the dark side of the democratic project because fraternity implies kinship, masculinity, it implies nation state, perhaps, complicity, etcetera. So I was wondering what your thoughts were on that, or what the reason was for that omission?

**C**hantal: Certainly, in part it was a feminist reason. I do not like the term fraternity. In fact, in my work fraternity is reformulated in the phrase 'liberty and equality for all' – with an emphasis on 'all'. I re-interpret the notion of fraternity by stressing the idea of inclusivity, to insist on the fact that it needs to be liberty and equality for all.

**C**an Altay: You have proposed Europe as a possible ground for testing, let's say, 'agonistic structures'. So let's imagine that within Europe you can test this agonism, but there is also the constitutive outside of Europe itself, so there is always a multiplicity of these antagonisms which can possibly turn into agonism. I am curious as to how you deal with the constitutive outside of Europe, if we say that Europe is a body.

**C**hantal: It can be constructed in many different ways, and some would of course be better than others. For instance, some people would construct it as Islam, others would construct it as the US, but it is certain that

Europe, in order to have an identity as Europe, needs to be distinguished from an 'outside'. This is another point on which I also have a disagreement with Habermas. Habermas sees Europe as some kind of vanguard of a cosmopolitan project. He believes that in Europe we are at the highest level of moral development. What he wants is to extend the European model worldwide so as to create a cosmopolitan order based on a cosmopolitan law. I do not think in those terms at all. I want to foster what I call a multi-polar world, in which there would be a multiplicity of regional units, each with their own specific way of understanding democracy.

In my view it is very important to acknowledge that modernisation, democratisation, should not necessarily mean Westernisation. I think, for instance, it is a big mistake to imagine that the Islamic world needs, in order to modernise and democratise, to adopt the Western model. We need to accept that there is a multiplicity of ways in which the democratic idea can be inscribed in different contexts. That is the kind of work I am interested in at the moment.

I am very critical of all those cosmopolitan projects that imagine the unification of the world around one single model, because what it would mean would be the hegemony of one single power. If you accept that every order is hegemonically constructed, then the only way to avoid the domination of one single power is to have a plurality of hegemonies. Hence the need to recognise the specificity of different poles in view of establishing some kind of agonistic confrontation among them.

Of course, there are important differences between the agonistic model at the level of domestic politics, at the European level, or at the level of international relations, but basically what is at stake is the same question. When conflict is not given the possibility of having legitimate channels of expression, it takes the form of violent antagonism, and this is something that we should try to prevent.

How can we prevent this explosion of antagonism on the global level? By creating the channels that would allow for conflict to take an agonistic form. This is the aim of a multi-polar model.

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