Autonomy via Heteronomy

Pascal Gielen

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According to art sociologist Pascal Gielen neoliberalism, by pushing artists to be more entrepreneurial and to embrace the creative industry, leads to a shrinking of the imaginative horizon and to the evaporation of the modern hope for autonomy. If we ever want to become modern, we have to make a political choice, he states.

Over the past few years, artists who still dare to defend their autonomy on some occasion or other have increasingly been confronted with stares of disbelief. And it's not just academics, policymakers or corporate managers who raise their eyebrows upon hearing this particular word. Even professionals from the art world hardly use it anymore and if they do, they do so hesitantly.

The rare artistic person who still stubbornly uses the word 'autonomy' in public risks being accused of showing a poor understanding of reality, especially in the Netherlands (in Flanders it is less of an issue). After all, in light of the economic situation they really ought to know better. Besides, there are artistic opportunities everywhere that are economically profitable – just look at the booming creative industry. So why do these individuals still "antisocially" cling to the isolation of the room-in-the-attic romantics? Is the Van Gogh syndrome still haunting the art world?

From a sociological point of view the debate seems a little unreal, as autonomy has very little to do with isolation, according to social scientists. It is also not the exclusive prerogative of artists or the art world. Indeed, there are very few sociologists who can imagine a modern society without autonomy. For instance, a judge who doesn't autonomously arrive at a just verdict but is motivated by financial gain is simply corrupt. A politician who couldn't care less about the public interest and favours business connections and party or family members is undermining the very essence of his political function. Likewise, universities where researchers are continuously tempted to do commissioned research – well-paid or not – will, in the long run, lose their symbolic credit to make objective statements or any claims to the truth.

As the sun of the Enlightenment rose, allowing us to leave the dark Middle Ages far behind us, albeit through trial and error, it was clear that the almighty law of God and monarchs no longer ruled. When the light no longer shone from the heavens and began shining from science, society also started reorienting and reorganising itself. From now on, the truth was no longer to be found at giddy heights but on the ground instead – and this is where autonomy began to play a crucial role.

In the interest of clear thinking, not only were the sciences and universities obliged to build strict institutional walls within which neither God nor power nor money could corrupt the objectifying methods. Meanwhile, political institutions, the law, and certainly economic institutions also had to erect similar barriers to safeguard their own well-being and proper functioning. For instance, what would the economy be like today without free competition? Or what kind of markets would we have today if the prices of products were not defined by autonomous competition but by the social position of the customers, as in

pre-modern days?

So, on the macrosociological level, boundaries were drawn between the various social domains, and they all needed to have autonomous decision-making apparatus and their own rules in order for modern society to function at all. That is why the social criticism in the media is often based on the conclusion that the boundaries between social subsystems have been transgressed. Morality, ethics and journalism all distinguish between good and bad on the basis of the alleged autonomy of well-defined domains. For instance, in her book No Logo, the Canadian journalist Naomi Klein criticises the fact that the domains of marketing and branding are intermingling with those of cultural production. [1]

Modern?

The reader may have noticed how in the preceding paragraphs the principles of a modern society still reign supreme. However, according to quite a few thinkers from the late 1970s and 1980s, the modern age and its principles have seen better days. At least, that's how it has sounded coming from the mouths of many a well-known post-modern philosopher. Bruno Latour, the idiosyncratic French philosopher of science, adds a little extra to the discussion with his claim that we "have never been modern" [2]. What Latour shares with post-modern thinkers is the conviction that the modern age has constructed boundaries and perpetuated contrasts that are in fact artificial human constructs. In the eyes of the post-moderns, one of these was for instance the distinction between high and low culture. According to Latour, modern thinking has resulted in so many contrasts or binary opposites that it has generated more and more hard-to-classify hybrids. Those who systematically look at the world using the same set of categories are running the risk of neglecting – or worse – discriminating against everything that appears outside of those categories. The same reasoning goes for the social subsystems outlined earlier. For instance, those who assume a too-rigid distinction between art and the economy will have a hard time grasping a phenomenon like the creative industry. If we adhere to Latour's adage "to follow the actor", we must admit that empirical reality does indeed look slightly different from how the modern age had envisioned it. Even the most autonomous of artists needs to eat and therefore must abide by some kind of economic logic.

From a microsociological point of view, not only artists but everyone has to navigate through quite a few social domains in order to survive. Therefore, everyone is a homo economicus and, hopefully, a subject bound by the law, and a political citizen and sometimes an artistic person and... Also, Latour is happy to add, not only people but objects too enjoy this kind of hybrid status. For instance, a work of art can simultaneously have an artistic, a legal, an economic, an educational, as well as an emotional value. In short, every object and every subject is an "and-and" entity. So, what's all this about autonomy and the integrity of social subsystems?

Those who keep holding on to such artificial divisions are not practising science but moralism or... critical social theory. Just look at the art sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, who continues to assume the existence of a relative autonomy of social domains [3]. The field of art also plays by its own rules. Those who do not abide by them do not gain access to the field, are excommunicated or decried as "commercial artists". To succeed in the art world, one has to prove one's autonomy by earning symbolic credit, which is something quite different than money or economic capital. In order to become a credible artist, one's accumulated artistic capital may only be economically profitable in the long run. Money and politics must remain outside of artistic reality. But it is here that Bourdieu's modern view of the world clashes with empirical reality. Bourdieu knows very well that the art world cannot survive without money if artists are to survive, and, therefore, the art world depends on the economy and sometimes on politics – for subsidies – to survive. Therefore, the only way that the art world can function according to its own rules and preserve its

autonomy is through a wholesale collective suppression: ignoring power and money. The art world can only sustain itself through "the production of belief", in the words of Bourdieu. Taking this logic to its extremes, it may be concluded that the autonomy of the art world is nothing but a social fiction – a conclusion that many in the Netherlands also drew after seeing the proposals for the cultural sector that were drawn up by the neoliberal government in 2011. With cultural policy becoming increasingly business-like, the writing has already been on the wall for over a decade, but it was only now that the artistic sector began to actually free itself from the delusion of its social fiction. The art world indeed continued to display very little perspective as it continued to consider its social value as something more than just some "left-wing hobby".

Perhaps Latour's way does actually offer a greater sense of reality. His no-nonsense "empiricism of proof" leaves little room for social fictions such as religion or other ghosts. Or, rather, Latour doesn't need belief to understand autonomy. Whereas Bourdieu continued to believe that heteronomy, or the mingling of art with money and power, should be avoided as much as possible in order to remain autonomous, Latour's subjects paradoxically seem to be embracing heteronomy in order to remain autonomous. Latour's Machiavellian-like reasoning is that we should seek as many alliances as possible in order to act. In other words, we must create win-win situations by networking ourselves as heterogeneously as possible. More concretely, artists who depend on government subsidies, private collectors, sponsors and / or their partners stand a better chance of operating autonomously than artists who depend exclusively on the favours of the government or a single Maecenas for their survival. In slightly more abstract terms, autonomy can only be arrived at via heteronomy. So, the Dutch government is absolutely right when it steers weird romantics towards corporations and the free market, and forces artists to become entrepreneurs. Or is it? If we follow Latour's logic, the answer is indeed: Not quite. Autonomy via heteronomy presupposes guarantees that an artist's sources – including government subsidies – will be as heterogeneous as possible. In other words, it assumes that politics will continue to preserve its autonomy to decide on the arts and not hand over total control to the free market.

A more important question is whether the government still has the desire to. Do neoliberal politicians really want to provide the necessary autonomy to – in its own words – "left-wing hobbies" that by their very nature are a threat to its policies? Let it be clear that ascribing a political – in this case "red" – colour to creative endeavours is probably an even bigger social fiction than the belief in art, especially in light of the fact that humanity has been engaging in creative practices since the prehistoric days, many thousands of years before the word "politics" was first used. Nevertheless, it is a perception that exists in the Netherlands today and it does indeed have its effects on reality, as we have experienced. Heteronomous networking, and therefore – after Latour – the condition for acting autonomously, can be frustrated by ideological considerations, religious beliefs and, especially, the wielding of power. It logically follows that autonomy requires more than just heteronomous connections. It must also be able to rely on institutions or social structures that enable, guarantee or, if need be, enforce heteronomous networking.

This brings us to a political aspect that Latour's empiricism has trouble dealing with. Latour believes that autonomy only refers to the possibility to act or to go on acting, regardless of the ideological direction of these acts. Computers have only been able to become significant players in our everyday lives because of their endless connections that transmutated the apparatuses (and so their identity) themselves. The fact that we hardly recognise the computers of thirty years ago is precisely why their current position in society is so significant. To network means to constantly anticipate and adapt, with the risk of completely losing oneself and one's own identity. But do artists want to let their art be transformed to such a degree, so that they won't recognise it anymore thirty years later? In fact, what we today call "art" has mutated enormously over the ages, which is why in the contemporary professional art world anyone who paints in the style dominant a

hundred years ago will no longer be considered an artist by his peers in the contemporary art world. At the same time, we still call paintings done a hundred years ago art. Art, according to Latour, will continue to "act" and thus will retain its autonomy. The question is whether it is desirable that a vodka logo or a Nike advertisement will be considered art in, say, thirty years, even while knowing that our wishes and intentions of today will hardly have very little influence on what will be considered art then. But that doesn't make the issue of desirability any less socially or scientifically relevant. After all, our current taste in art will no doubt influence the direction art will go in and where it may end up thirty years later. Our current notions of art also help define the heterogeneous connections we will make in the near future.

But that, as was pointed out earlier, is a political-ideological question that Latour cannot really deal with. Which is not to say that he has nothing interesting to say about politics; his newer books and exhibitions betray a keen interest in politics [4], although Latour seems mainly interested in investing his own "dada", (i. e., the object or thing) with some political significance. As he himself states in one of his many examples, "How does the river act politically?" [5]. That is quite different from the question of how politics should deal with this river. While Latour's research – quite rightly – tries to empirically prove that the "thing" indeed succeeds in gathering people around itself and does have a political impact, he regards critical questions with regard to the direction of political decision-making "cheap". After all, Latour engages in empirical science and not in moralism, let alone critical social theory. However, Latour's theoretical advances on the question of autonomy do stand: Heteronomous connections do seem to be important in making autonomous actions possible, but they don't give a decisive answer about which direction these actions should take. This enables social democrats, diehard communists, neoliberals, neo-nationalists and fascists alike to easily adapt the sciences to serve their own goals. The road to autonomy via heteronomy can still twist this way and that and take on many different shades, which is why the via, or the road, to take also deserves our attention.

Via

Latour's allergic reaction to critique and especially critical social theory can at least be appreciated as being logical and consistent. If one writes off the modern era as nonexistent, one would also have to topple one of the pillars it rests on. After all, the entire modern project rests largely on the foundation of critique. It is only via the road of critique that modern mankind has managed to emancipate itself from tradition, tribalism, paternalism, superstition, God, monarchy and country. Democracy, for instance, would be impossible without a critique of the class system, there would be no feminism without a rejection of the paternalistic culture and no emancipation of the social classes without a critique of capitalism. But there would also be no modern art without the iconoclastic course of the historical avant-garde. Art as we know it today, like all of modern science and society, rests largely on creative destruction, as Joseph Schumpeter described it [6]. The road of the modern era has led us to catastrophic moments in history, such as the concentration camps and nuclear bombs, but, at the same time, it has brought us scientific progress, more social equality and prosperity – all via critique.

Critique is thus not all negativity or "cheap" cultural pessimism; it also provides a positive force and the energy to create alternatives. It is precisely this critical vitality that has allowed one "ism" after another to flourish in the art world. Each new artistic step can be read as a critique of its predecessor, just like every scientific step forward can be read as a critique of the ignorance of the previous generation of researchers. Just as the post-gender perfumes of the 1980s were hardly able to mask the underlying structural inequality between women and men, post-modernism has contributed almost nothing to the eradication of differences through distinction, which remain structurally entrenched. It is to the responsibility of critique to dig ever deeper to unearth these inequalities.

But then again, critique is only possible if one can stand up and transcend, if only for a while, the everyday routine to take a good look at one's own actions and those of others. In short, critique presupposes the possibility to transcend ourselves and the world and then look at ourselves and the world from a distance. This distance also provides a platform that offers an unconventional view, which suddenly turns everything that once seemed completely normal into an anomaly, while all that seemed totally abnormal becomes suddenly feasible. Generating such a distance from society or culture is a very risky undertaking because one cannot really disengage oneself from society, as sociologists and other social scientists know only too well. Such an "exodus" becomes even less likely when that society is called a global village.

Baron Munchausen's heroic act of pulling himself out of a swamp by his own pigtail is only possible in the world of fiction. This kind of autonomous act can only occur in fairy tales and Disney films. However, these examples do bring us to a crucial point: Not only is the truly autonomous act imagined in fiction, it is precisely the world of fiction or imagination that makes autonomy conceivable in real life. Although we cannot really escape from society, we can still retreat to an imaginary world. This also answers the question posed in the introduction of whether art is important to society because it is exactly here that art demonstrates its importance to modern society. It is fiction and art that allow us to, as German system theorist Niklas Luhmann described it, "see the world through a double lens" [7]. The simple fact that art exists in modern society shows that we can always make a distinction between nonfiction and fiction or between reality and imagination.

This also provides us with the option of looking at reality from a fictional point of view or even looking at how we look in reality. Luhmann calls these things "observations of the second or third order". Even if individuals are stuck in their own society, they can still make the leap to an imaginary world at any time and any place. There they can daydream and invent their grand utopian schemes. Thus far, there has been no political or economic regime, however totalitarian, that has succeeded in taking that individual right away from us. Which, of course, is not to say that there aren't many examples of forces that have tried to manipulate the freedom of the imagination. The experience of being able to move from a real world to an imaginary one means that people can experience themselves as autonomous beings. Indeed, our entire notion of autonomy would be unthinkable without the initial potential for exodus or without a continuous to-and-fro between the nonfictional world and an imagined "reality". In other words, it is on this road or via that the concept of autonomy is born.

A society and, more precisely, a government now has the option of offering institutional guarantees to facilitate the road from nonfiction to fiction, which increases both the experience of, and the longing for, autonomy. But that, as I mentioned earlier, is a political issue. Does a society want more of its people (as well as groups and organisations) to have the right to self-determination, or have the desire for autonomy? Apart from this issue of will, we may assume that the societies that embed the space of the imagination and give it more room, for instance through art institutions, will stimulate both the desire for

autonomy and confirm autonomy itself as a legitimate and relevant value. But it's not only about art. Heterogeneous networking, or the ability to move from one world to another, assumes that different worlds, which gives society the option, through the arts, for instance, to offer institutional guarantees of autonomy.

This brings us back to the social domains of modern society. To understand the world as consisting of various domains that have their own value regimes not only opens up the possibility of critique: it offers us the chance to move from one world to another, making it possible for us to continuously observe, appreciate and evaluate events and our own actions, from a different perspective. For instance, it enables and allows artists to look at their own work from an artistic, social, commercial, political and educational perspective. This possibility of being able to constantly change their perspective makes them at least autonomous in their imagination. The same goes for the classroom, where the space between teacher and students is only autonomous when the subject under discussion can and may be interpreted from different perspectives. With its call for realism, the currently prevailing neoliberalism attempts to reduce this kaleidoscope of approaches to a single perspective, that of the free market. The push to be more entrepreneurial and to embrace the creative industry is supposed to convince us that only one world matters. Such a reduction leads to a shrinking of the imaginative horizon and, at the same time, to the evaporation of the modern hope for autonomy. It not only states that a vodka logo may in the future also be called art, but that it will be the only art in a future in which only Philip Morris decides which art really matters and may therefore be called art. No autonomy without heteronomy and no heteronomy without the real possibility of being able to move between various social domains. The value of autonomy was perhaps a dream of the modern era, a goal worth striving for, but one we still haven't reached. We still have not become modern. Whether we wish to and are able to return to that via is a political choice.

Pascal Gielen is full Professor of Sociology of Art and Politics at the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts, University of Antwerp where he leads the Culture Commons Quest Office (CCQO). Gielen is editor-in-chief of the international book series *Arts in Society*. In 2016, he became laureate of the Odysseus grant for excellent international scientific research of the Fund for Scientific Research Flanders in Belgium. His research focuses on creative labour, the institutional context of the arts and cultural politics. Gielen has published many books translated in English, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish.

Footnotes

1. Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2000).
2. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
3. Pierre Bourdieu, *Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).
4. Peter Weibel and Bruno Latour (eds.), *Iconoclash, Beyond the Image-Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (Cambridge and London: ZKM and MIT Press: Karlsruhe, 2002).
5. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2005).
6. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).
7. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999).

Tags

Art Discourse, Autonomy, Capitalism