Democratic Politics in the Age of Post-Fordism

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Political philosopher Chantal Mouffe shows how the existing hegemonic structures in current political systems can best be opposed by the development of counter-hegemonic practices. Specifically, cultural and artistic practices can play a major role in this because they are pre-eminently the terrain on which new subjectivities can be developed.

In recent years we have witnessed an incredible acceleration in the process of commodification in the field of culture. With the development of the culture industries, the worst nightmares of Horkeimer and Adorno seem to have been realized. Indeed, some theorists claim that, through our dependence on the entertainments corporations, we have become totally subjugated to the control of capital and that we cannot even imagine modes of resistances. Aesthetics, they say, has been so completely harnessed towards the development of a hedonistic culture that there is no space left for a subversive experience – not even in art.

Were this to be true, we would have to conclude that there is no alternative to the present post-political world. The current hegemonic form of neoliberal globalization would constitute our only horizon and we would have to abandon the hope of fostering the agonistic democracy that I have been advocating in my work. To be sure, they are those who would rejoice at such a prospect because they see the present situation as a cause for celebration. In their view, the post-political consensus indicates that, with the disappearance of the adversarial model of politics, democracy has become more mature and that antagonisms have been overcome.

I disagree with such a view and I consider that a well-functioning democracy requires a confrontation of democratic political positions. If passions cannot be mobilized by traditional democratic parties because they privilege a 'consensus at the centre', those passions tend to find other outlets, in diverse fundamentalist movements, around particularistic demands or non-negotiable moral issues. When a society lacks a dynamic democratic life with a real confrontation among a diversity of real alternatives, the terrain is laid for other forms of identifications of an ethnic, religious or nationalist nature and this leads to the emergence of antagonisms that cannot be managed by the democratic process. In my recent work I have, for instance, tried to show how the post-political consensus which characterizes most advanced liberal-democratic societies is at the origin of the growing success of rightwing populist parties. They are often the only ones who challenge the 'there is no alternative' dogma proclaimed by the traditional parties and attempt to mobilize passions against what they present as the uncaring 'establishment', composed of elitist bureaucrats who do not listen to the voice of the people and ignore its real concerns.

Such an evolution clearly represents a threat for democracy and a central aim of my reflection has been to bring to the fore the dangers of post-politics and the urgency of revitalizing democracy thanks to the proliferation of a variety of agonistic public spaces. To

visualize how an agonistic democracy can be brought about, it is necessary to grasp the challenge facing democratic politics and this requires an adequate understanding of the terrain in which we have to act. We need, for instance, to understand the nature of the transition that advanced industrial societies have undergone since the last decades of the twentieth century. This transition has had important consequences in the field of artistic and cultural practices, which is why I have decided to centre my intervention on this topic.

A great number of theorists coming from a variety of theoretical perspectives agree that advanced industrial societies have, at the end of the last century, witnessed a transition which they present, either as move from industrial to post-industrial society, from Fordism to post-Fordism, or from a disciplinary society to a society of control. I have chosen to concentrate on the Fordism to post-Fordism approach because it is the most influential one. However I would like to note that those approaches are not necessarily incompatible and might even be combined. Each is inscribed in a specific intellectual tradition and it emphasizes a particular aspect of the transition.

From Fordism to Post-Fordism

To apprehend what is at stake in the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, it is useful to examine the differences between the approaches influenced by the critical theory of Adorno and Horkeimer and those who are influenced by the Italian autonomist tradition. Their main disagreement lies in the role that the culture industry has played in the transformations of capitalism. It is well known that Adorno and Horkeimer saw the development of the culture industry as the moment when the Fordist mode of production finally managed to enter the field of culture. They see this evolution as a further stage in the process of commodification and subjugation of society to the requisites of capitalist production. For Paolo Virno and some other post-Operaist theorists, on the contrary, the culture industry played an important role in the process of transition between Fordism and post-Fordism because it is there that new practices of production emerged which led to the overcoming of Fordism. The space granted to the informal, the unexpected and the unplanned, which for Horkeimer and Adorno were un-influential remnants of the past, are for Virno anticipatory omens. With the development of immaterial labour they began to play an increasingly important role and that opened the way for new forms of social relations. In advanced capitalism, says Virno, the labour process has become performative and it mobilizes the most universal requisites of the species: perception, language, memory and feelings. Contemporary production is virtuosic and productive labour in its totality appropriates the special characteristics of the performing artist. According to him the culture industry is in fact the matrix of post-Fordism.

Theorists influenced by the autonomist tradition concord on the fact that the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism needs to be understood, not as dictated by the logic of the development of capitalist forces of production, but as reaction to the new practices of resistances of the workers. Disagreements exist, however, among them concerning the political consequences of this transition. Although many of them use the notion of 'multitude' to refer to the new type of political agent characteristic of the current period, they do not envisage its future in the same way. Some like Hardt and Negri celebrate in the multitude the emergence of a new revolutionary subject which will necessarily bring down the new form of domination embodied in empire. Incorporating, although not always in a faithful way, some of the analyses of Foucault and Deleuze, they assert that the end of the disciplinary regime that was exercised over bodies in enclosed spaces like schools, factories and asylums, and its replacement by the procedures of control linked to the growth of networks, is leading to a new type of governance which opens the way to more autonomous and independent forms of subjectivity. With the expansion of new forms of cooperative communication and the invention of new communicative forms of life, those subjectivities can express themselves freely and they will contribute to the formation of a

new set of social relations that will finally replace the capitalist system.

Paolo Virno, while agreeing on the potential for new forms of life, is not so sanguine about the future. He sees the growth of the multitude as an ambivalent phenomenon and he also acknowledges the new forms of subjection and precarization which are typical of the post-Fordist stage. [1] It is true that people are not as passive as before, but it is because they have now become active actors of their own precarization. So instead of seeing in the generalization of immaterial labour a type of spontaneous communism like Hardt and Negri, Virno tends to see post-Fordism as 'a manifestation of the communism of capital'.

Despite their differences, there is something, however, that all those thinkers have in common: their conviction that it is necessary to relinquish the conception of radical politics aimed at 'taking power' in order to control the institutions of the state. They claim that one should ignore the existing power structures, and dedicate oneself to constructing alternative social forms outside the state power network as well as the existing institutions. Virno asserts that it is in the refusal to work and the different forms of exodus and disobedience that one should locate any possibility of emancipation. Any majoritarian model of society, organized around a state has to be rejected and replaced by another model of organization of the multitude which is deemed to be more universal. It has the form of a unity provided by common places of the mind, cognitive- linguistic habits and the general intellect.

A Hegemonic Approach

While agreeing on the necessity to acknowledge the fundamental transformations in the mode of regulation of capitalism represented by the transition to post-Fordism, I think that we should envisage this transition from the point of view of the theory of hegemony. I recognize the importance of not seeing the transformations undergone by our societies as the mere consequence of technological progresses and on bringing to the fore their political dimension. As social philosopher Andre Gorz, among others, has pointed out, they should be understood as a move by capital to provide what was a fundamentally political answer to the crisis of governability of the 1970s. Many factors have contributed to this transition and it is important to grasp the complexity of its dynamics.

My problem with Operaist and post-Operaist views is that, by putting the emphasis on the workers' struggles, they tend see this transition as if it was exclusively moved by one single logic, the workers' resistances to the process of exploitation forcing the capitalists to reorganize the process of production, and to move to the post-Fordist era of immaterial labour. According to them capitalism can only be reactive and, contrary to Deleuze and Guattari, they refuse to accept the creative role played by both capital and the working class. What they deny is in fact the role played in this transition by the hegemonic struggle.

To clarify what I understand by hegemonic struggle, let me introduce some basic tenets of my theoretical framework. According to the approach that I am advocating and which has been developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* written jointly with Ernesto Laclau, two key concepts are necessary to grasp the nature of the political: 'antagonism' and 'hegemony'. [2] On one side it is necessary to acknowledge the dimension of the political as the ever present possibility of antagonism and this requires, on the other side, coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the indecisiveness that pervades every order. This means recognizing the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and envisaging society as the product of a series of practices whose aim is to establish order in a context of contingency. The practices of articulation through which a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions fixed are what we call 'hegemonic practices'. Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Things could always have been otherwise and every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. It is always the expression of a particular structure of power relations. What is at a given

moment accepted as the 'natural order', with the common sense that accompanies it, is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices; it is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity outside of the practices that bring it into being. Every hegemonic order is susceptible to being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices which attempt to disarticulate it to install another form of hegemony.

I would like to suggest that in order to introduce the hegemonic dimension in the transition between Fordism and post-Fordism, we can find interesting insights in the interpretation of this transition put forward by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello. In their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism,* they bring to light the role played by what they call 'artistic critique' in the transformation undergone by capitalism in the last decades of the twentieth century.[3] They show how the demands of autonomy of the new movements of the 1960s have been harnessed in the development of the post-Fordist networked economy and transformed into new forms of control. The aesthetic strategies of the counterculture: the search for authenticity, the ideal of self-management, the anti-hierarchical exigency, are now used to promote the conditions required by the current mode of capitalist regulation, replacing the disciplinary framework characteristic of the Fordist period. Today, artistic and cultural production play a central role in the process of capital valorisation and artistic critique has become an important element of capitalist productivity through 'neo-management'.

From my point of view what is interesting in this approach is that it reveals that a crucial dimension of the transition was a process of discursive rearticulation of existing elements. This is what makes it possible to understand it in terms of a hegemonic struggle. To be sure, Boltanski and Chiapello do not use this vocabulary but theirs is a clear example of what Gramsci calls 'hegemony through neutralization' or 'passive revolution' to refer to situations where demands which challenge an established hegemonic order are recuperated by the existing system, by satisfying them in a way that neutralizes their subversive potential. To envisage the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism in such a mode helps us to understand it as a hegemonic move by capital to re-establish its leading role and to reassert its legitimacy.

By adding to the analysis offered by *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, the undeniable role played in this transition by workers' resistances, we can arrive at a more complex understanding of the forces at play in the emergence of the current neoliberal hegemony. This hegemony is the result of a set of political interventions in a complex field of economic, legal and ideological forces. It is a discursive construction that articulates in a very specific manner a manifold of practices, discourses and languages-games of very different nature. Through a process of sedimentation the political origin of those contingent practices has been erased and they have become naturalized. Neoliberal practices and institutions appear as the outcome of natural processes and the forms of identification that they have produced have crystallized into identities which are taken for granted. This is how the 'common sense' which constitutes the framework for what is considered as possible and desirable has been established.

To challenge neoliberalism it is therefore vital to transform this framework and this requires the production of new subjectivities capable of subverting the existing hegemony. Today's capitalism relies increasingly on semiotic techniques in order to create the modes of subjectivation which are necessary for its reproduction. In modern production, the control of the souls (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 which require the constantly creation of new needs and an incessant desire for the acquisition of goods. Hence the crucial role played by advertising in our consumer societies. It is the construction of the very identity of the consumer which is at stake in the techniques of advertising. Those techniques are not limited to promoting specific products, but aim at producing fantasy worlds with which the consumers of goods will identify. Indeed, nowadays to buy something is to enter into a specific world, to become part of an imagined community. To maintain its hegemony, the neoliberal system

needs to permanently mobilize people's desires and shape their identities. This is why the cultural terrain now occupies such a strategic place. To be sure, the realm of culture has always played an important role in hegemonic politics but in the times of post-Fordist production this role has become absolutely crucial. A counter-hegemonic politics should therefore engage with this terrain, so as to foster other forms of identification.

Counter-Hegemonic Struggle and Agonistic Practices

Now that I have presented the main lines of the hegemonic approach to the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, I would like to make some considerations concerning the construction of counter-hegemonic practices. It is clear that, once social reality is envisaged in terms of hegemonic practices, the process of social critique characteristic of radical politics cannot consist, as in the view advocated by the post-Operaist theorists to whom I referred earlier, in withdrawing from the existing institutions but, on the contrary, must engage with them so as to disarticulate the existing discourses and practices through which the current hegemony is established and reproduced. Such a counter-hegemonic struggle cannot merely consist of separating the different elements whose discursive articulation is at the origin of those practices and institutions. The second moment, the moment of re-articulation, is crucial. Otherwise we would encounter a chaotic situation of pure dissemination, leaving the door open for attempts of re-articulation by non-progressive forces. Indeed, we have many historical examples of situations in which the crisis of the dominant order led to rightwing solutions.

It is also important not to envisage this struggle as the displacement of a supposedly false consciousness that would reveal the true reality. Such a perspective is completely at odds with the anti-essentialist premises of the theory of hegemony which rejects the very idea of a 'true consciousness' and asserts that identities are always the result of processes of identification. It is through insertion in a manifold of practices, discourses and languages games that specific forms of individualities are constructed. According to the hegemonic approach, social reality is discursively constructed and the political has a primary structuring role because social relations are ultimately contingent; any prevailing articulation results from an antagonistic confrontation whose outcome is not decided in advance. What is therefore needed is a strategy whose objective is, through a set of counter-hegemonic interventions, to disarticulate the existing hegemony and to establish a more democratic one thanks to a process of re-articulation of new and old elements into different configurations of power. This is why the transformation of political identities cannot consist of a rationalist appeal to the true interest of the subject, but of its insertion in practices that will mobilize its affects towards the disarticulation of the framework in which the process of identification is taking place, thereby opening the way for other forms of identification.

I would like to stress that to construct oppositional identities it is not enough to simply foster a process of 'de-identification' or 'de-individualization'. The second move, the moment of 're-identification', of 're-individualization' is decisive. To insist only on the first move is in fact to remain trapped in a problematic which postulates that the negative moment is sufficient, on its own, to bring about something positive, as if new subjectivities were already there, ready to emerge when the weight of the dominant ideology is lifted. Such a view, which unfortunately informs many forms of critical art, fails to come to terms with the nature of the hegemonic struggle and the complex process of construction of identities.

That the critique and disarticulation of the existing hegemony needs to be accompanied by a process of re-articulation is something that is missed by all approaches in terms of reification or false consciousness that think that the critique of ideology is sufficient to bring about a new order, free from oppression and power. It is also missed, albeit in a different way, by the theorists of the multitude who believe that its oppositional

consciousness does not require political articulation. This leads them to evacuate what I take to be the crucial question for a radical democratic politics: how to establish a 'chain of equivalence' among the different democratic struggles. Those struggles do not automatically converge and they might often conflict with each other. The aim of a radical democratic politics should be to provide surfaces of inscription where their diverse demands can be articulated around a 'collective will' (Gramsci). I am convinced that cultural and artistic practices could play an important role in the agonistic struggle because they are a privileged terrain for the construction of new subjectivities. Think, for instance, of the success of feminist artistic practices in undermining the hegemonic order by revealing how the construction of images contributed to construction and reproduction of oppressive social norms and by offering alternative views. To revitalize democracy in our post-political societies, what is urgently needed is to foster the multiplication of agonistic public spaces where everything that the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate can be brought to light and challenged. This can be done in a multiplicity of ways but the thought that I want to share with you is that radical politics can only be successful when it is envisaged on the mode of a 'war of position' aimed at transforming the existing institutions and the creation of a new hegemony.

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Footnotes

1. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotex(e), 2004).
2. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*: *Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London / New York: Verso, 2001).
3. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London / New York: Verso, 2006).

Tags

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