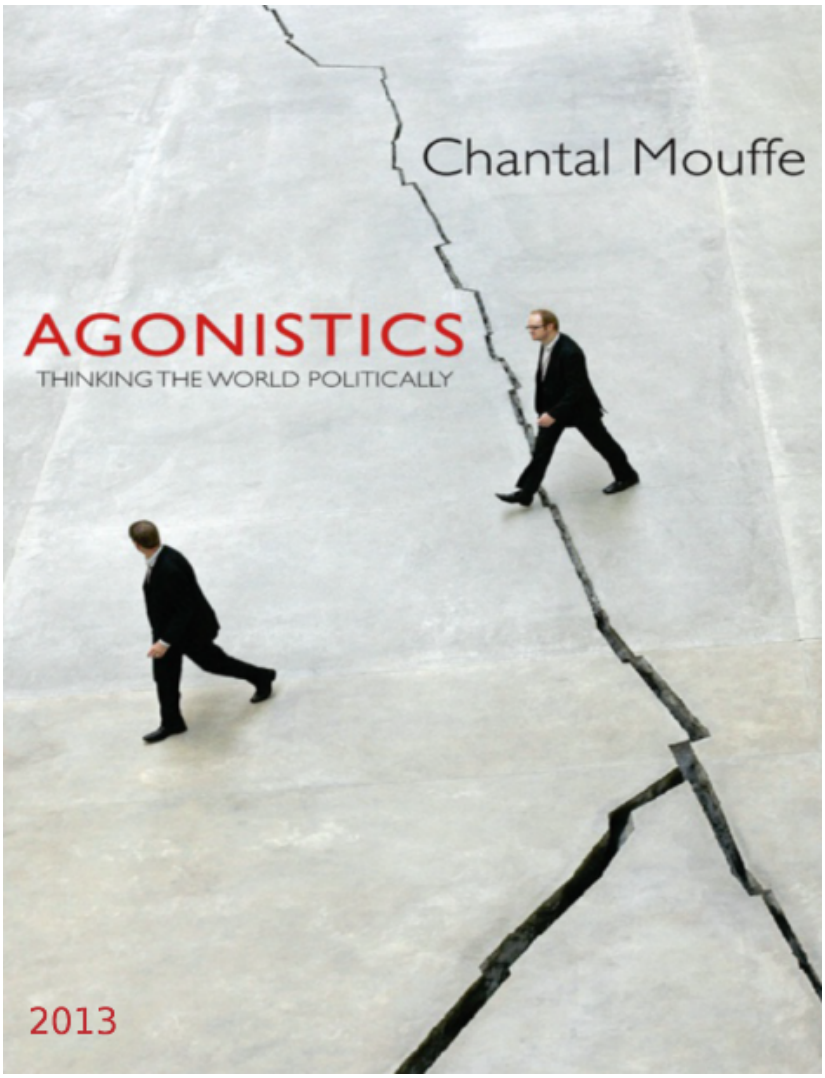
AGONISTICS

THINKING THE WORLD POLITICALLY

CHANTAL MOUFFE



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Interview with Chantal Mouffe

Foreword

I have discussed the ideas developed in this book in various places over recent years, and some of them have already been published, but in a different form. Since the objective of these interventions was to present my agonistic approach in diverse contexts and to enquire about its relevance in new areas, I always had to begin by introducing the basic tenets of agonistics, which implied a certain amount of repetition. In editing those pieces for publication, I have tried to eliminate repetition as much as possible, except where it felt necessary for the clarity of the argument. As a consequence, although most chapters relate in one way or another to presentations that I made in public lectures or conferences, none of them reproduce those presentations in their original form. The last chapter has been written especially for this publication.

For those unfamiliar with my approach, at the end of this book I have included an interview I gave some years ago that will help situate the questions discussed in the present volume within the larger context of my work. The interview was conducted for *Und jetzt?*, an anthology published in 2007 by Suhrkamp, which has kindly allowed it to be reproduced here. By providing a brief introduction to several topics I have been dealing with over the years, I hope this interview will contribute to a better understanding of my current position.

I would like to thank Het beschrijf and Passa Porta, whose invitation to spend a month in Brussels as a writer in residence in May 2012 allowed me to work on the final draft of this manuscript in very pleasant surroundings, with the added bonus of attending the Kustenfestivaldesarts, which provided a great stimulus for my reflections on artistic practices.

Introduction

The essays collected in this volume examine the relevance of the agonistic approach I have elaborated in my previous work for a series of issues that I take to be important to the left-wing project. Each chapter deals with a different question, but in each case my aim is to address the question in a political way. As Ernesto Laclau and I argued in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, to think politically requires recognizing the ontological dimension of radical negativity.[1] It is because of the existence of a form of negativity that cannot be overcome dialectically that full objectivity can never be reached and that antagonism is an ever present possibility. Society is permeated by contingency and any order is of an hegemonic nature, i.e. it is always the expression of power relations. In the field of politics, this means that the search for a consensus without exclusion and the hope for a perfectly reconciled and harmonious society have to be abandoned. As a result, the emancipatory ideal cannot be formulated in terms of a realization of any form of 'communism'.

The reflections proposed here take their bearings from the critique of rationalism and universalism that I have developed since *The Return of the Political*, where I began to elaborate a model of democracy which I call 'agonistic pluralism'.[2] In inscribing the dimension of radical negativity in the political domain, I proposed in that book to distinguish between 'the political' and 'politics'. By 'the political', I refer to the ontological dimension of antagonism, and by 'politics' I mean the ensemble of practices and institutions whose aim is to organize human coexistence. These practices, however, always operate within a terrain of conflictuality informed by 'the political'.

The key thesis of 'agonistic pluralism' was later elaborated in *The Democratic Paradox*, where I argued that a central task of democratic politics is to provide the institutions which will permit conflicts to take an 'agonistic' form, where the opponents are not enemies but adversaries among whom exists a conflictual consensus.[3] What I intended to show with this agonistic model was that it was possible, even when starting with the assertion of the ineradicability of antagonism, to envisage a democratic order.

Nonetheless, it is true that political theories that affirm such a thesis usually end up defending an authoritarian order as the only way to keep civil war at bay. This is why most political theorists committed to democracy believe that they have to assert the availability of a rational solution to political conflicts. My argument, however, is that the authoritarian solution is not a necessary

logical consequence of such an ontological postulate, and that by distinguishing between 'antagonism' and 'agonism', it is possible to visualize a form of democracy that does not deny radical negativity.

In recent years, reflecting on worldwide political developments, I have been led to enquire about the possible implications of my approach for international relations. What are the consequences in the international arena of the thesis that every order is an hegemonic one? Does it mean that there is no alternative to the current unipolar world, with all the negative consequences this entails? Undoubtedly, the illusion of a cosmopolitan world beyond hegemony and beyond sovereignty has to be relinquished. But this is not the only solution available, as we can also conceive of another one: a pluralization of hegemonies. In my view, by establishing more equal relations between regional poles, a multipolar approach could be a step towards an agonistic order where conflicts, although they would not disappear, would be less likely to take an antagonistic form.

Another aspect of my reflections concerns the consequences of the hegemonic approach regarding radical projects whose aim is to establish a different social and political order. How can such a new order be brought about? What strategy to follow?

The traditional revolutionary approach has mostly been forsaken, but it is increasingly replaced by another one that, under the name of 'exodus', reproduces, albeit in a different way, many of its shortcomings. In this book I take issue with the total rejection of representative democracy by those who, instead of aiming at a transformation of the state through an agonistic hegemonic struggle, advocate a strategy of deserting political institutions. Their belief in the availability of an 'absolute democracy' where the multitude would be able to self-organize without any need of the state or political institutions signifies a lack of understanding of what I designate as 'the political'.

To be sure, they question the thesis of a progressive homogenization of the 'people' under the category of 'the proletariat', while affirming the multiplicity of 'the multitude'. But to acknowledge radical negativity implies recognizing not only that the people is multiple, but that it is also divided. Such a division cannot be overcome; it can only be institutionalized in different ways, some more egalitarian than others. According to this approach, radical politics consists in a diversity of moves in a multiplicity of institutional terrains, so as to construct a different hegemony. It is a 'war of position' whose objective is not the creation of a society beyond hegemony, but a process of radicalizing democracy – the construction of more democratic, more egalitarian institutions.

There is another topic to which I have dedicated special attention in recent years, thanks mainly to the frequent invitations I have received to speak at art schools, museums and biennales. Can an agonistic conception help artists to theorize the nature of their interventions in public space? What can be the role of artistic and cultural practices in the hegemonic struggle? In the current stage of post-fordist capitalism, the cultural terrain occupies a strategic position because the production of affects plays an increasingly important role. Being vital to the process of capitalist valorization, this terrain should constitute a crucial site of intervention for counter-hegemonic practices.

In order to address those different topics, the book is organized as follows. The first chapter revisits the main lines of the agonistic approach that I have elaborated over several years in a series of books. It also distinguishes my perspective from the other agonistic theories currently available. Stressing the antagonistic dimension which characterizes the political domain, I put special emphasis on the difference between ethical and political perspectives and the necessity for agonistic theorists to acknowledge the link between agonism and antagonism instead of postulating the availability of an 'agonism without antagonism'.

After having clarified my theoretical problematic, in the subsequent chapters I engage with a series of topics: an agonistic approach to international relations, the modes of integration of the European Union, different visions of radical politics, and finally cultural and artistic practices as they relate to politics. In the second chapter, I discuss some of the issues raised by the idea of a multipolar world. Developing a theme already introduced in *On the Political*, where, criticizing several cosmopolitan projects, I argued in favour of a multipolar world, I now enquire about the implications of seeing the world as a pluri-verse. Taking issue with the view that democratization requires Westernization, I defend the thesis that the democratic ideal can be inscribed differentially in a variety of contexts.

Some of my readers will probably be surprised by my critique of the way social and political theorists use the term 'modern' to qualify Western institutions. Have I not myself repeatedly referred to 'modern democracy' to designate the Western model? In truth, I have ceased doing it in recent writings: I now try to avoid speaking of 'modern democracy'. I have become aware that by doing so, I contradict my assertion regarding the contextualist nature of liberal democracy, as well as my claim that it does not represent a more advanced stage in the development of rationality or morality.

I strongly believe that it is high time for left-wing intellectuals to adopt a pluralist approach and to reject the type of universalism that postulates the

rational and moral superiority of Western modernity. At the moment, when the Arab uprisings have put the question of how to build democracy on the agenda in several Middle Eastern countries, I see this question as being of the utmost importance. It would indeed be a fatal mistake to force those countries to adopt the Western model, refusing to recognize the central place of Islam in their cultures.

The European Union is the topic of the third chapter, where I examine the relevance of the agonistic approach for envisaging possible forms of European integration. I argue in favour of conceiving the EU on the mode of a 'demoi-cracy' composed of a multiplicity of diverse *demoi* providing different spaces for the exercise of democracy. Scrutinizing the causes of the growing disaffection towards the European project, I also stress the urgency of elaborating a new vision that offers an alternative to the neo-liberal policies that are at the origin of the current crisis.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to contrasting two models of radical politics. In the first place, it argues against the strategy of 'withdrawal from' inspired by the Italian Autonomia movement and theorized by post-operaist theorists like Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno, who call for an exodus from the state and traditional political institutions and for a rejection of representative democracy. In contrast, I advocate a strategy of 'engagement with'. Such a strategy includes a multiplicity of counter-hegemonic moves aiming at a profound transformation, not a desertion, of existing institutions. Scrutinizing the conflicting theoretical frameworks informing these two opposite strategies, I suggest that the problem with the kind of radical politics defended by the exodus theorists is that they have a flawed understanding of the political. This can be seen in the observation that they do not accept the ineradicable dimension of antagonism.

In the last chapter, I turn my attention to the field of cultural and artistic practices. I engage with the ongoing discussion about the effects of post-fordist capitalism on the cultural and artistic fields. According to some thinkers, the commodification of culture is such that there is no space anymore for artists to play a critical role. Others, while in disagreement with this pessimistic diagnosis, claim that such a possibility still exists, but only outside the art world.

My own view is that cultural and artistic practices can play a critical role by fostering agonistic public spaces where counter-hegemonic struggles could be launched against neo-liberal hegemony. Taking my bearings from Antonio Gramsci, I assert the central place occupied by the cultural domain in the construction of 'common sense', highlighting the necessity of artistic

intervention in order to challenge the post-political view that there is no alternative to the present order. Here again, my views are contrasted with those of post-operaist theorists already discussed in chapter 3. But this time the focus is on their interpretation of the transition from fordism to post-fordism and the role played by cultural practices in this transition.

Finally, in the conclusion I examine recent protest movements in the light of the two modes of radical politics I mentioned earlier: post-operaist and agonistic. I argue that these movements should be seen as reactions to the lack of agonistic politics in liberal democracies, and that they call for a radicalization, not a rejection, of liberal democratic institutions.

I decided to call this book *Agonistics* to stress that it consists in a variety of theoretico-political interventions in domains where I think it is necessary to question some established left-wing positions. Its aim is to foster an agonistic debate among those whose objective is to challenge the current neo-liberal order.

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

2 Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London and New York: Verso, 2005.

3 Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London and New York: Verso, 2005.

Chapter 1

What Is Agonistic Politics?

In recent years, agonistic approaches to politics have become increasingly influential. However, they exist in a variety of forms, which has often created some confusion. Since this book intends to examine the relevance of my conception of agonism to several fields, it is necessary to clarify the specificity of my approach and the way it differs from other agonistic theories. I will begin by recalling the basic tenets of the theoretical framework that informs my reflections on the political as it was elaborated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, co-written with Ernesto Laclau.[1]

In this book, we argued that two key concepts – 'antagonism' and 'hegemony' – are necessary to grasp the nature of the political. Both pointed to the importance of acknowledging the dimension of radical negativity that manifests itself in the ever-present possibility of antagonism. This dimension, we proposed, impedes the full totalization of society and forecloses the possibility of a society beyond division and power. This, in turn, requires coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the undecidability that pervades every order. In our vocabulary, 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. We call 'hegemonic practices' the practices of articulation through which a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed. According to this approach, every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Things could always be otherwise and every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. Any order is always the expression of a particular configuration of power relations. What is at a given moment accepted as the 'natural' order, jointly with the common sense that accompanies it, is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices. It is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity that is exterior to the practices that brought it into being. Every order is therefore susceptible to being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices that attempt to disarticulate it in an effort to install another form of hegemony.

In *The Return of the Political, The Democratic Paradox* and *On the Political* I

have developed these reflections on 'the political', understood as the antagonistic dimension which is inherent to all human societies.[2] To that effect, I have proposed the distinction between 'the political' and 'politics'. 'The political' refers to this dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. It is a dimension that can never be eradicated. 'Politics', on the other hand, refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seeks to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting, since they are affected by the dimension of 'the political'.

As I have repeatedly emphasized in my writings, political questions are not mere technical issues to be solved by experts. Proper political questions always involve decisions that require making a choice between conflicting alternatives. This is something that cannot be grasped by the dominant tendency in liberal thought, which is characterized by a rationalist and individualist approach. This is why liberalism is unable to adequately envisage the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails. These are conflicts for which no rational solution could ever exist, hence the dimension of antagonism that characterizes human societies.

The typical understanding of pluralism is as follows: we live in a world in which there are indeed many perspectives and values, but due to empirical limitations, we will never be able to adopt them all; however, when put together, they could constitute an harmonious and non-conflictual ensemble. I have shown that this type of perspective, which is dominant in liberal political theory, has to negate the political in its antagonistic dimension in order to thrive. Indeed, one of the main tenets of this kind of liberalism is the rationalist belief in the availability of a universal consensus based on reason. No wonder, therefore, that the political constitutes liberalism's blind spot. By bringing to the fore the inescapable moment of decision – in the strong sense of having to decide within an undecidable terrain – what antagonism reveals is the very limit of any rational consensus.

The denial of 'the political' in its antagonistic dimension is, I have argued, what prevents liberal theory from envisaging politics in an adequate way. The political in its antagonistic dimension cannot be made to disappear by simply denying it or wishing it away. This is the typical liberal gesture, and such negation only leads to the impotence that characterizes liberal thought when confronted with the emergence of antagonisms and forms of violence that, according to its theory, belong to a bygone age when reason had not yet managed to control the supposedly archaic passions. This is at the root of liberalism's current incapacity to grasp the nature and causes of new

antagonisms that have emerged since the Cold War.

Liberal thought is also blind to the political because of its individualism, which makes it unable to understand the formation of collective identities. Yet the political is from the outset concerned with collective forms of identification, since in this field we are always dealing with the formation of 'us' as opposed to 'them'. Here the main problem with liberal rationalism is that it deploys a logic of the social based on an essentialist conception of 'being as presence', and that it conceives objectivity as being inherent to things themselves. It cannot recognize that there can only be an identity when it is constructed as difference, and that any social objectivity is constituted through acts of power. What it refuses to admit is that any form of social objectivity is ultimately political and that it must bear the traces of the acts of exclusion that govern its constitution.

In several of my books I have used the notion of the 'constitutive outside' to explain this thesis, and since it plays a crucial role in my argumentation, I think it is necessary to explain it again here.

This term was originally proposed by Henry Staten to refer to a number of themes developed by Jacques Derrida through notions like 'supplement', 'trace' and 'difference'.[3] Staten's objective was to highlight the fact that the creation of an identity always implies the establishment of a difference. To be sure, Derrida developed this reflection at a very abstract level, refering to any form of objectivity. I have, for my part, been interested in bringing to the fore the consequences of such a reflection in the field of politics and to show its relevance for the constitution of political identities. I argue that once we understand 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, which always deals with collective identities, is about the constitution of a 'we' which requires as its very condition of possibility the demarcation of a 'they'.

This does not mean, of course, that such a relation is by necessity antagonistic. Indeed, many us/them relations are merely a question of recognizing differences. But it means that there is always the possibility that this 'us/them' relation might become one of friend/enemy. This happens when the others, who up to now were considered as simply different, start to be perceived as putting into question *our* identity and threatening *our* existence. From that moment on, as Carl Schmitt has pointed out, any form of us/them relation – be it religious, ethnic or economic – becomes the locus of an antagonism.

What is important to acknowledge here is that the very condition of possibility of the formation of political identities is at the same time the condition of impossibility of a society from which antagonism can be eliminated.

AN AGONISTIC MODEL

It is in the context of this ever-present possibility of antagonism that I have elaborated what I call an 'agonistic' model of democracy. My original intention was to provide a 'metaphoric redescription' of liberal democratic institutions – a redescription that could grasp what was at stake in pluralist democratic politics. I have argued that in order to understand the nature of democratic politics and the challenge that it faces, we needed an alternative to the two main approaches in democratic political theory.

One of those approaches, the aggregative model, sees political actors as being moved by the pursuit of their interests. The other model, the deliberative one, stresses the role of reason and moral considerations. What both of these models leave aside is the centrality of collective identities and the crucial role played by affects in their constitution.

My claim is that it is impossible to understand democratic politics without acknowledging 'passions' as the driving force in the political field. The agonistic model of democracy aims to tackle all the issues that cannot be properly addressed by the other two models because of their rationalist, individualistic frameworks.

Let me briefly recall the argument I elaborated in *The Democratic Paradox*. I asserted that when we acknowledge the dimension of 'the political', we begin to realize that one of the main challenges for pluralist liberal democratic politics consists in trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations. In my view, the fundamental question is not how to arrive at a consensus reached without exclusion, because this would require the construction of an 'us' that would not have a corresponding 'them'. This is impossible because, as I have just noted, the very condition for the constitution of an 'us' is the demarcation of a 'them'.

The crucial issue then is how to establish this us/them distinction, which is constitutive of politics, in a way that is compatible with the recognition of pluralism. Conflict in liberal democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated, since the specificity of pluralist democracy is precisely the recognition and the legitimation of conflict. What liberal democratic politics requires is that the others are not seen as enemies to be destroyed, but as

adversaries whose ideas might be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas is not to be questioned. To put it in another way, what is important is that conflict does not take the form of an 'antagonism' (struggle between enemies) but the form of an 'agonism' (struggle between adversaries).

For the agonistic perspective, the central category of democratic politics is the category of the 'adversary', the opponent with whom one shares a common allegiance to the democratic principles of 'liberty and equality for all', while disagreeing about their interpretation. Adversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation of the principles to become hegemonic, but they do not put into question the legitimacy of their opponent's right to fight for the victory of their position. This confrontation between adversaries is what constitutes the 'agonistic struggle' that is the very condition of a vibrant democracy.[4]

A well-functioning democracy calls for a confrontation of democratic political positions. If this is missing, there is always the danger that this democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values or essentialist forms of identifications. Too much emphasis on consensus, together with aversion towards confrontations, leads to apathy and to a disaffection with political participation. This is why a liberal democratic society requires a debate about possible alternatives. It must provide political forms of identifications around clearly differentiated democratic positions.

While consensus is no doubt necessary, it must be accompanied by dissent. Consensus is needed on the institutions that are constitutive of liberal democracy and on the ethico-political values that should inform political association. But there will always be disagreement concerning the meaning of those values and the way they should be implemented. This consensus will therefore always be a 'conflictual consensus'.

In a pluralist democracy, disagreements about how to interpret the shared ethico-political principles are not only legitimate but also necessary. They allow for different forms of citizenship identification and are the stuff of democratic politics. When the agonistic dynamics of pluralism are hindered because of a lack of democratic forms of identifications, then passions cannot be given a democratic outlet. The ground is therefore laid for various forms of politics articulated around essentialist identities of a nationalist, religious or ethnic type, and for the multiplication of confrontations over non-negotiable moral values, with all the manifestations of violence that such confrontations entail.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, let me stress once again that this

notion of 'the adversary' needs to be distinguished sharply from the understanding of that term found in liberal discourse. According to the understanding of 'adversary' proposed here, and contrary to the liberal view, the presence of antagonism is not eliminated, but 'sublimated'. In fact, what liberals call an 'adversary' is merely a 'competitor'. Liberal theorists envisage the field of politics as a neutral terrain in which different groups compete to occupy the positions of power, their objective being to dislodge others in order to occupy their place, without putting into question the dominant hegemony and profoundly transforming the relations of power. It is simply a competition among elites.

In an agonistic politics, however, the antagonistic dimension is always present, since what is at stake is the struggle between opposing hegemonic projects which can never be reconciled rationally, one of them needing to be defeated. It is a real confrontation, but one that is played out under conditions regulated by a set of democratic procedures accepted by the adversaries.

I contend that it is only when we acknowledge 'the political' in its antagonistic dimension that can we pose the central question for democratic politics. This question, *pace* liberal theorists, is not how to negotiate a compromise among competing interests, nor is it how to reach a 'rational', i.e. fully inclusive, consensus without any exclusion. Despite what many liberals want to believe, the specificity of democratic politics is not the overcoming of the we/they opposition, but the different way in which it is established. The prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions or to relegate them to the private sphere in order to establish a rational consensus in the public sphere. Rather, it is to 'sublimate' those passions by mobilizing them towards democratic designs, by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives.

AGONISM AND ANTAGONISM

Having clarified the way in which agonism and antagonism are intimately related in my approach, I can now turn to examining what distinguishes my specific understanding of agonistic politics from several other conceptions of it. Let's take, for instance, the case of Hannah Arendt. 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, although Arendt puts great emphasis on human plurality and insists that politics deals with the community and the reciprocity among human beings who are different from each other, 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 that of Habermas, since it is also inscribed in the horizon of 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 as a space where consensus can be reached. In fact, we can find in her writings some formulations that one could imagine coming from Habermas. For instance, in an interview she gave in 1970 – called the 'Reif-interview' – she delineated an alternative political organization to the representative system and criticized the role of parties. She proposed replacing parties with councils deemed more suitable for making decisions. She said, 'If only ten of us are sitting around a table, each expressing his opinions, each hearing the opinions of others, then a rational formation of opinion can take place, through the exchange of opinions.'[5]

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' like in Habermas. As Linda Zerilli has noted, 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.[6] However, neither Arendt nor Habermas 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'.

My conception of agonism also differs from the one, inspired by Arendt, that Bonnie Honig has put forward in her book *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*.[7] According to Honig, there are two perspectives on politics: *virtue* as found in the work of Kant, John Rawls or Michael Sandel, and *virtú* as postulated by Machiavelli, Nietzsche and Arendt. For Honig, the core of the *virtú* perspective is the agonistic contest through which citizens are encouraged to keep policies and ideas open to discussion and to challenge any attempt to put an end to debate. While not disagreeing with her on the importance of the dimension of contest, I do not think that one can envisage the nature of the agonistic struggle simply in terms of an ongoing contestation over issues or identities. One also needs to grasp the crucial role of hegemonic articulations and the necessity not only of challenging what exists but also of constructing new articulations and new institutions.

The problem with Honig's agonistic approach can be exemplified by the way

she envisages feminist politics. In an article called 'Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Arendt and the Politics of Identity', she argues that the importance of Arendt's work for feminists is that it provides them with an agonistic politics of performativity, which instead of reproducing and representing 'what' we are, agonistically generates 'who' we are by producing new identities.[8]

Although acknowledging that Arendt never presented herself as a feminist, Honig asserts that her agonistic politics, according to which the self is a complex site of multiplicity whose identities are always performatively produced, is particularly suited to feminist politics. Honig believes that Arendt allows us to envisage feminism as a site of contestation over the meaning, practice and politics of sex-gender and sexuality. As Mary Dietz notes, Honig 'appropriates Arendt to disrupt the solid positionalities of identity with a politics of irreducible identities so as to overcome gender and freeing identity and the term women from restrictive categories that reduce acting to being and efface difference for that sake of equality and sameness'.[9]

As a result, identity is replaced by 'identities' and it becomes impossible for women to serve as the unexamined starting point of feminist politics. Such a feminism, says Dietz, conceives the public space of politics as a verbal game of dispute where the central question is not what we should do, but who we are.

In my view, this is not enough to envisage an adequate form of feminist politics. I do not believe that the agonistic struggle should be exclusively centred on the deconstruction of the 'who-ness' and the proliferation of identities at the cost of addressing the question of what we should do as citizens. Here we could address to Honig the same critique made by Hannah Pitkin in her article 'Justice: On Relating Private and Public', where she takes Arendt to task for placing too great a stress on the aspect of freedom understood as action in the context of speech acts and the presentation of the self, and not taking seriously enough the issue of justice, of what is to be done.[10]

We can find similar limitations in the conception put forward by another agonistic theorist, William Connolly.[11] Connolly is influenced by Nietzsche and has tried to make the Nietzschean conception of the 'agon' compatible with democratic politics. He calls for a radicalization of democracy, the result of the cultivation by citizens of a new democratic ethos of engagement that drives them to enter into agonistic contestation so as to disturb all attempts at closure. Central to this vision is the notion of 'agonistic respect' that Connolly sees as emerging from the shared existential condition of the struggle for identity and as shaped by the recognition of our finitude. Agonistic respect represents for him the cardinal virtue of deep pluralism, and it is the most

important political virtue in our contemporary pluralistic world.

No doubt, respect is necessary among the adversaries involved in an agonistic struggle, but one important question needs to be raised concerning the limits of agonistic respect. Can all antagonisms be transformed into agonisms and all positions be accepted as legitimate and accommodated within the agonistic struggle? Or are there demands that need to be excluded because they cannot be part of the conflictual consensus that provides the symbolic space in which the opponents recognize themselves as legitimate adversaries? In other words, can we envisage a pluralism without antagonism?

Those are the properly political questions that Connolly does not address, and this is why I do not think that his approach can provide the framework for an effective democratic politics. In order to envisage how to act politically, the moment of decision cannot be avoided, and this implies the establishment of frontiers, the determination of a space of inclusion/exclusion.

An approach that avoids this moment will not be able to challenge the dominant hegemony and transform existing relations of power. What Connolly's conception of 'agonistic respect' proposes is an 'ethos of pluralism', but this is not sufficient to constitute, as he claims, a new transformative democratic politics. I do not want to deny the importance of his reflections on the necessity of fostering a pluralist ethos, but a truly political approach requires dealing with the limits of pluralism. As in the case of Bonnie Honig, what is missing here are the two dimensions which I have argued are central for politics: antagonism and hegemony.

The main shortcoming of the agonistic approaches influenced by Arendt and Nietzsche is that, because their main focus is on the fight against closure, they are unable to grasp the nature of the hegemonic struggle. Their celebration of a politics of disturbance ignores the other side of such struggle: the establishment of a chain of equivalence among democratic demands and the construction of an alternative hegemony. It is not enough to unsettle the dominant procedures and to disrupt the existing arrangements in order to radicalize democracy.

When we acknowledge that antagonism is ineradicable and that every order is an hegemonic order, we cannot avoid facing the core questions of politics: what are the limits of agonism and what are the institutions and the forms of power that need to be established in order to allow for a process of radicalizing democracy? This requires that we do not elude the moment of decision, and this will necessarily imply some form of closure. It might be that an ethical discourse can avoid this moment, but a political one certainly cannot.

This incapacity to account for the necessary moment of closure that is constitutive of the political is the necessary consequence of an approach which envisages pluralism as a mere valorization of multiplicity, thereby eluding the constitutive role of conflict and antagonism. My approach, on the contrary, acknowledges the constitutive character of social division and the impossibility of a final reconciliation.

Both approaches assert that under modern democratic conditions, the people cannot be envisaged as 'one'. But while in the first approach the people is seen as 'multiple', in the second the people appears as 'divided'. It is only when division and antagonism are recognized as being ineradicable that it is possible to think in a properly political way.

ETHICS OR POLITICS

I am aware that the current zeitgeist is not favourable to such an understanding of 'the political', as the tendency to envisage this domain in ethical terms is much more popular. Several authors coming from different theoretical horizons could provide examples of this 'ethical turn', but I have chosen to say a few words about Alain Badiou. Badiou's case is particularly interesting because at first glance, one would not expect to find him in the ethical camp. However, as Oliver Marchart has claimed, this is indeed where his conception of politics should be located.[12] Marchart's discussion of Badiou's approach can help strengthen my own argument about the current displacement of the political by the ethical.

Badiou distinguishes between the political and politics, but his distinction differs from my own. He uses the term 'le politique' (the political) to refer to traditional political philosophy, and the term 'la politique' (politics) to designate his own position. As Marchart notes, Hannah Arendt is Badiou's main target because she argues that truth is not a category of the political sphere. In his view, a political philosophy which advocates the plurality of opinions and excludes the notion of truth is bound to end up promoting the politics of parliamentarism. Against the characterization of the political as a plurality of opinions, Badiou asserts the singularity of politics produced by subjects who are defined by their singular relation to a truth event and not by their mutual exchange of opinions.

Politics, he claims, is the order of truth and the event, and he is adamant that, to allow for the event to occur, it is necessary to leave aside all the facts and to be faithful to something which is not a given act of reality. Indeed, an event is an evanescent interruption of the real. It cannot be predicted, since it

is the disruption of the state of the situation. The decision of a subject to remain faithful to an event is what produces a truth. This is how he puts it: 'I shall call "truth" (*a* truth) the real process of a fidelity to an event: that which this fidelity *produces* in the situation.'[13]

Examining Badiou's conception of politics, Marchart rightly points out that 'by constructing the political side of his theory around the notion of fidelity as he does in his books "Ethics" and "Saint Paul", Badiou privileges an ethical perspective on politics. As a result political action becomes an ethical and even quasi religious effort at remaining faithful to a specific event through one's thinking and acting.'[14] And when he wonders if Badiou's politics of the unconditional can still reasonably be called a politics, or if one should not rather speak about an ethics, I think the answer should definitively be the latter. I also accord with his view that a rigorous ethics of the unconditional is clearly at odds with the field of politics, which always deals with the conditional. How are we going to enact a 'politics of truth' in the terrain of real politics? Such an injunction is clearly incompatible not only with the type of liberal democratic pluralism that Badiou rejects, but also with any project of radical democracy. Thus, it leads us into a political dead end.

According to the approach that I am advocating, the domain of politics is not and cannot be the domain of the unconditional because it requires making decisions in an undecidable terrain. This is why the type of order which is established through a given hegemonic configuration of power is always a political, contestable one; it should never be justified as dictated by a higher order and presented as the only legitimate one.

As I argued earlier, to institute an order, frontiers need to be drawn and the moment of closure must be faced. But this frontier is the result of a political decision; it is constituted on the basis of a particular we/they, and for that very reason it should be recognized as something contingent and open to contestation. What characterizes democratic politics is the confrontation between conflicting hegemonic projects, a confrontation with no possibility of final reconciliation. To conceive such a confrontation in political, not ethical, terms requires asking a series of strategic questions about the type of 'we' that a given politics aims at creating and the chain of equivalences that is called for.

This cannot take place without defining an adversary, a 'they' that will serve as a 'constitutive outside' for the 'we'. This is what can be called the 'moment of the political', the recognition of constitutive character of social division and the ineradicability of antagonism. This is why theorists who are unable or unwilling to acknowledge this dimension cannot provide an effective guide for

envisaging the nature of radical politics.

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

2 Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London and New York: Verso, 1993; *The Democratic Paradox*, London and New York: Verso, 2000; *On the Political*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

3 See Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985.

4 For a fuller development of this argument, see *The Democratic Paradox*, chapter 4.

5 Hannah Arendt, 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' in *Crisis of the Republic*, New York: Harvest Books, 1969, 233.

6 Linda Zerilli, 'We Feel Our Freedom: Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt', *Political Theory* 33:2, 2005, 158–188.

7 Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.

8 Bonnie Honig, 'Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Arendt and the Politics of Identity' in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1995.

9 Mary Dietz, 'Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt' in ibid., 17–50.

10 Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, 'Justice: On Relating Private and Public', *Political Theory* 9:3, 1981, 327–352.

11 See, for instance, William E. Connolly, *Pluralism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.

12 Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

13 Alain Badiou, *Ethics*, London and New York: Verso, 2001, 42.

14 Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, 129.

Chapter 2

Which Democracy for a Multipolar Agonistic World?

My agonistic model has been elaborated in the context of a specific political regime: liberal pluralist democracy. However, I think that some of its insights – for example, the importance of offering the possibility for conflicts to take an 'agonistic' form in order to avoid the emergence of antagonistic ones – can be useful in the field of international relations. While things are slowly beginning to change, since the end of the Cold War we have lived in a largely unipolar world. The absence of recognized alternatives to the dominant hegemonic order has prevented those who have tried to resist this order from finding legitimate forms of expression.

As I suggested in *On the Political*, it is the lack of political channels for challenging the hegemony of the neo-liberal model of globalization that is at the origin of the proliferation of discourses and practices that seek to radically negate the established international order.

Reflecting on the dangers of 'seeing the world as a universe' led me to criticize the theorists who, in a variety of ways, have advocated the establishment of a cosmopolitan democracy. My main objection to the cosmopolitan approach is that, whatever its formulation, it postulates the availability of a world beyond hegemony and beyond sovereignty, therefore negating the dimension of the political. Moreover, it is usually predicated on the universalization of the Western model and therefore does not make room for a plurality of alternatives. We should be aware that envisaging the aim of politics – be it at the national or international level – as the establishment of a consensus around one single model eliminates the possibility of legitimate dissent, thereby creating a favourable terrain for the emergence of violent forms of antagonisms.

My critique of cosmopolitanism in *On the Political* was mainly directed against the model of cosmopolitan democracy put forward by theorists like David Held, Daniele Archibugi and Ulrich Beck, who argue that in the present conditions of globalization and after the collapse of communism, the Kantian cosmopolitan project can finally become a reality.[1]

But there are of course other kinds of cosmopolitanism, and a growing number of theorists have in fact tried to reformulate the cosmopolitan project so as to take account of the critiques that had been directed against the traditional Kantian version. Next to the traditional Kant-inspired universalist cosmopolitanism of those who, like Martha Nussbaum, assert that our primary allegiance should be to the 'worldwide community of human beings', we find a growing number of 'new cosmopolitans' who reject such a perspective and want to bring cosmopolitanism down to earth by recognizing the realities of power and acknowledging the need for politically viable solidarities.

This new cosmopolitanism exists in a variety of forms, among them the 'discrepant cosmopolitanism' of James Clifford, the 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' of Homi Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, the 'multi-situated cosmopolitanism' of Bruce Robbins, the 'decolonial cosmopolitanism' of Walter Mignolo and the 'critical cosmopolitanism' of Paul Rabinow. All these theorists try to reconcile cosmopolitanism, seen as an abstract standard of planetary justice, with a need for belonging and acting at levels smaller that the species as a whole. Their aim is to foster a sense of reciprocity and solidarity at the transnational level, and they stress the need to bring to the fore the negative consequences of economic, political and cultural neo-liberal models. This new cosmopolitanism does not emphasize the values of rationality and universality, and it criticizes the Eurocentrism it sees at the core of the traditional cosmopolitanism, linked as it is to the Enlightenment and the European experience of modernity.

I have sympathy for the critique of Eurocentrism that we find in the new cosmopolitanism, and many of its themes chime with the argument I will make in this chapter. But I also have serious reservations with respect to its approach. First, I do not really see the usefulness of trying to redefine the notion of cosmopolitanism so as to make it signify almost the opposite of its usual meaning – for instance, when the advocates of new cosmopolitanism speak of a 'rooted cosmopolitanism'. It is no doubt important to stress the need for transnational solidarity and reciprocity, but this could be done by using a different notion, less tainted by the abstract universalism that the new cosmopolitanism thinkers want to relinquish.

But more importantly, my problem with the new cosmopolitanism is that, like the traditional cosmopolitanism, albeit in a different way, it also ignores 'the political' in its antagonistic dimension. It is mainly concerned with the recognition of a plurality of allegiances and diverse forms of belonging, and seems to believe that, redefined accordingly, the cosmopolitan ideal could provide the ethical framework needed to build a more equal society. The

abstract universalism of the Kantian model is rejected in favour of a new 'pluralist universalism', but what is absent from this approach is the recognition of the necessary conflictual character of pluralism. The pluralism of the advocates of new cosmopolitanism is also a case of what I call 'a pluralism without antagonism'.

Despite all the efforts of the 'new cosmopolitans' to insist on the 'rooted' character of their vision, they cannot liberate themselves from its core meaning, which emphasizes a common belonging beyond all differences and dilutes individual attachments to specific communities. In the end, their universalist perspective promotes the hegemony of Western modernity.

To take account of the political in its antagonistic dimension requires acknowledging that the world is a pluri-verse, not a universe. This provokes the following question: If we acknowledge, contrary to the cosmopolitan theorists, that every order is an hegemonic order and that there is no possible order 'beyond hegemony', and if we also acknowledge the negative consequences of a unipolar world organized around the hegemony of an hyper-power, then what is the alternative? My suggestion is that the only solution lies in the pluralization of hegemonies. Abandoning the illusory hope for a political unification of the world, we should advocate the establishment of a multipolar world. Such a world order could be called 'agonistic' in the sense that it would acknowledge a plurality of regional poles, organized according to different economic and political models without a central authority. I am not pretending, of course, that this would bring about the end of conflicts, but I am convinced that those conflicts are less likely to take an antagonistic form than in a world where a single economic and political model is presented as the only legitimate one and is imposed on all parties in the name of its supposedly superior rationality and morality.

Importantly, by speaking of an 'agonistic' world order, I am not trying to 'apply', strictly speaking, my agonistic domestic model to the field of international relations. What I am doing is bringing to the fore some similarities between these two very different realms. My objective is to stress that what is at stake in both cases is the importance of acknowledging the dimension of 'the political' and the conflicts which pluralism entails. We need to realize that, instead of trying to bring about a consensus that would eliminate the very possibility of antagonism, the crucial task both in the domestic and international domain is to find ways to deal with conflicts so as to minimize the possibility that they will take an antagonistic form.

But of course the situation is very different in the domestic and the international domains. The kind of 'conflictual consensus' based on divergent

interpretations of shared ethico-political principles that, I have argued, is necessary for the implementation of an agonistic model of liberal democracy at the domestic level cannot be realized at the global level. Such a consensus presupposes the existence of a political community which is simply not available at the global level. Indeed, to envisage the world order in terms of a plurality of hegemonic blocks requires relinquishing the idea that they need to be part of an encompassing moral and political unit. The illusions of a global ethics, global civil society and other cosmopolitan dreams prevent us from recognizing that in the field of international relations, one can only count on prudential agreements. All attempts, through the establishment of a global covenant, to definitively overcome the 'state of nature' between states run into insurmountable difficulties.

NORBERTO BOBBIO'S INSTITUTIONAL PACIFISM

Norberto Bobbio's model of 'institutional pacifism' provides a good example of such difficulties. Bobbio's cosmopolitan approach consists in applying Hobbes's contractualism to the relations between states. Utilizing the Hobbesian distinction between *pactum societatis* and *pactum subjectionis*, he argues that what is needed to create a peaceful international order is, in a first move, that states establish among themselves a permanent association through a treaty of non-aggression, jointly with a series of rules in order to resolve their disputes. This stage of *pactum societatis* should be followed by their submission to a common power that would ensure their effective adherence to the agreed treaties, using force if necessary (*pactum subjectionis*). Bobbio distinguishes three stages: the first, the polemical stage, refers to the situation in the state of nature in which conflicts are resolved only by force; the second, the agonistic stage, corresponds to the *pactum societatis*, which excludes the use of reciprocal force to resolve conflicts, electing instead to settle them by negotiation; and finally, the pacific stage is when a *pactum subjectionis* is established with the existence of a Third Party able to enforce the agreements established in the agonistic stage.

The pacific stage would see the overcoming of the state of nature in international relations. Bobbio believes that, although we have not yet reached the stage of a *pactum subjectionis*, the creation of the United Nations was an enormous step in that direction. He proposes a distinction between two different kinds of 'Judges',

> one who, despite his superior authority, does not have the coercive power to enforce his decision (as still happens in international law today) and another whose superior authority grants him this power

> insofar as the pact of obedience has entrusted the use of legitimate force to it and to it alone. Only when the Judge has coercive power is the pacific stage wholly achieved.[2]

The current situation is one in which the United Nations finds itself in the position of a powerless Third Party Judge. This is due to the fact that states remain sovereign and have not yet abandoned their monopoly of force to a common authority endowed with exclusive rights of coercive power. For Bobbio, a peaceful international system requires the completion of the transition from the agonistic to the pacific stage by the concentration of military force in the hands of a supreme international authority.

Although inspired by Hobbes, Bobbio's project parts ways with him in two significant respects. The pact of submission for which *Leviathan* offers a model could only exist within a state. Hobbes asserted that the passage from a state of nature to a civil union was not possible on the level of international relations, and he repeatedly denied the possibility of both a *pactum societatis* and a *pactum subjectionis* among states. Moreover, the state Hobbes spoke of was of an autocratic nature. Bobbio goes further: not only does he want to apply this model to relations among states, he also wants the Third Party to acquire a democratic form. This is why he insists that this entrusting of coercive power to a superior entity should be the result of a universal agreement founded on democratic procedures.

He thus asserts that peace and democracy are inextricably linked. For the power of the international Leviathan not to be oppressive, it is important that the states that are at the origin of the contract through which the 'superstate' holder of a legal monopoly on international force is established are democracies constitutionally committed to the protection of the fundamental rights of their citizens.

The problem remains, however, that not all existing states are democratic. This leads Bobbio to difficulties he openly acknowledges:

> I am well aware that my whole argument is based on conjecture inspired by the Kantian idea that perpetual peace is feasible only among states with the same form of government – republican government (the form in which collective decisions are made by the people) – supplemented by the ideas that the union of states must also be republican in form … Like any conjecture, my thesis may be expressed only as an 'if-then' hypothetic proposition: 'If all the states were republican, if the society of all states were republican, then.' 'If' is the stumbling block.[3]

Bobbio is in fact caught in a vicious circle that he formulates in the following

way:

> states can become democratic only in a fully democratized international society, but a fully democratized international society presupposes that all the states that compose it are democratic. The completion of one process is hindered by the non-completion of the other.[4]

He is nevertheless hopeful for the future because, in his view, the number of democratic states is increasing. He believes that the process of the democratization of international society is therefore truly under way.

* * *

There are many people who would disagree with this optimistic proposal, among them Robert Kagan. In his book *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, Kagan argues that the global competition between liberal and autocratic governments is likely to intensify in the coming years.[5] Kagan is, of course, a neo-conservative, concerned with the maintenance of American hegemony. But many people on the left are also sceptical about Bobbio's optimistic view of the future. They have argued that, despite what is so often claimed in notions like 'the international community' and 'global civil society', globalization has not produced a real political unification of the world. Instead of having become 'flat' or 'smooth', the world is increasingly striated and many of the fault lines between different regions have deepened. As Danilo Zolo has argued: 'globalization does not, despite the overconfident claims advanced by the theorists of modernization and convergence, produce a cultural homogenization of the world: quite the opposite, for it arouses particularistic reactions that assert the identity of cultural codes rooted in nations and ethnic groups'.[6]

According to Zolo, what we are witnessing is a process of Westernization understood as 'cultural homogenization without integration'. Instead of the project of a 'contractualist' unification of the global political system advocated by Bobbio, what is happening is an attempt at hegemonic unification. And it is precisely such an attempt which is at the origin of an increasing number of violent forms of resistance.

The key question, however, is not one of pessimism versus optimism. We should instead address the issue in a different way. If, as I have argued, every order is by necessity an hegemonic one, it is clear that the political unification of the world, if it was ever to happen, could only take place under the hegemony of a central power. Bobbio's figure of a democratic international Leviathan – created through a pact of submission in which all states agree through democratic procedures that a Third Party Judge will have the coercive

power to resolve their conflicts – can only be a global hegemon.

The democratic world order that Bobbio advocates is in fact a unipolar world where, in the name of universalism, the Western model of democracy has been imposed worldwide. This would have dire consequences, and we are already witnessing how current attempts to homogenize the world are provoking violent reactions from those societies whose specific values and cultures are threatened by the enforced universalization of the Western model. It cannot be denied that, far from creating the conditions for a more peaceful world, the unipolar order resulting from the demise of the Soviet Union has in fact led to the emergence of new antagonisms.

WHICH DEMOCRACY FOR A MULTIPOLAR AGONISTIC WORLD?

What are the consequences of my approach for democracy? What becomes of democracy in a multipolar order? Does my proposal for a multipolar agonistic world entail abandoning the idea that democracy could be established worldwide? This is the question that I now want to address.

It is evident that a multipolar world will not necessarily be a democratic one. Several of its poles might be organized around different political principles and a coexistence of opposing political regimes is therefore unavoidable. This is, of course, the situation that we are beginning to witness, with the first steps towards a multipolar world in which China, certainly not a democracy, will no doubt play an important role. I believe that a multipolar world, even if all its regional poles are not democratically organized, is better than a unipolar order because it is less likely to foster the emergence of extreme forms of antagonisms.

But we do not need to discard the possibility that democracy could one day become established worldwide. However, this question has to be envisaged in a very different way than the usual one. We have to relinquish the claim that the process of democratization should consist in the global implementation of the Western liberal democratic model. Democracy in a multipolar world can take a variety of forms, according to the different modes of inscription of the democratic ideal in a variety of contexts.

As I have argued in *The Democratic Paradox*, liberal democracy is an articulation that combines two different traditions: liberalism, with its emphasis on individual liberty and universal rights; and democracy, which privileges the idea of equality and ‘rule by the people’, i.e. popular sovereignty.[7] Such an articulation is not a necessary but a contingent one; it is the product of a specific history. The liberal democratic model, with its

particular conception of human rights, is the expression of a given cultural and historical context, in which, as has often been noted, the Judeo-Christian tradition plays a central role. Such a model of democracy is constitutive of our form of life and it is certainly worthy of our allegiance, but there is no reason to present it as the only legitimate way of organizing human coexistence and to try to impose it on the rest of the world. It is clear that the kind of individualism dominant in Western societies is alien to many other cultures, whose traditions are informed by different values. Democracy, understood as 'rule by the people', can therefore take other forms – for instance, forms in which the value of community is more meaningful than the idea of individual liberty.

The dominant view, found in many different currents of political theory, asserts that moral progress requires the acceptance of the Western model of liberal democracy because it is the only possible institutional framework for the implementation of human rights. This thesis has to be rejected, but that does not necessarily mean discarding the idea of human rights. Human rights might, in fact, continue to play a role, but on the condition that they are reformulated in a way that permits a pluralism of interpretations.

The work of Raimundo Panikkar provides important insights on this issue. In his article 'Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?' Panikkar asserts that in order to understand the meaning of human rights, it is necessary to scrutinize the function played by this notion in our culture.[8] This will allow us, he says, to determine whether this same function is fulfilled in different ways in other cultures. Panikkar urges us to enquire into the possibility of what he calls 'homeomorphic' notions of human rights – i.e. functional equivalents of the notion of human rights in other cultures. Looking at Western culture, we ascertain that human rights are presented as providing the basic criteria for the recognition of human dignity and as being the necessary condition for a just social and political order. Therefore, the question we need to ask is whether other cultures give different answers to the same question.

Once it is acknowledged that the dignity of the person is what is at stake in human rights, the possibility of different manners of envisaging this question becomes evident, as well as the different ways in which it can be answered. What Western culture calls 'human rights' is in fact a culturally specific form of asserting the dignity of the person, and it would be very presumptuous to declare it to be the only legitimate one. Many theorists have pointed out how the very formulation of the concept in terms of 'rights' depends on a way of moral theorizing that, while appropriate for modern liberal individualism, can be inappropriate for grasping the question of the dignity of the person in other

cultures.

According to François Jullien, for instance, the idea of ‘rights’ privileges the freeing of the subject from its vital context and does not acknowledge the value of its integration in multiple social relations. It corresponds to a defensive approach that relinquishes the religious dimension and presents the individual as absolute. Jullien notes that the concept of ‘rights of man’ does not find any echo in the thought of classical India, which does not envisage man as being isolated from the rest of the natural world. While ‘liberty’ is the final word in European culture, for the Far East, from India to China, that word is ‘harmony’.[9]

In the same line of thought, Panikkar illustrates how the concept of human rights relies on a well-known set of presuppositions, all of which are distinctively Western. He identifies these presuppositions as follows: there is a universal human nature that can be known by rational means; human nature is essentially different from and higher than the rest of reality; the individual has an absolute and irreducible dignity that must be defended against society and the state; the autonomy of that individual requires that society be organized in a non-hierarchical way, as a sum of free individuals. All of these presuppositions, claims Panikkar, are definitively Western and liberal and are distinguishable from other conceptions of human dignity in other cultures. For instance, there is no necessary overlap between the idea of the ‘person’ and the idea of the ‘individual’. The ‘individual’ is the specific way in which Western liberal discourse formulates the concept of the self. Other cultures, however, envisage the self in different ways.

Many consequences stem from those considerations. One of the most important is that we have to recognize that the idea of ‘autonomy’, which is so central in Western liberal discourse and which is at the centre of our understanding of human rights, does not have the same priority in other cultures, where decision-making is less individualistic and more cooperative. This does not signify that these cultures are not concerned with the dignity of the person and the conditions for a just social order. What it means is that they deal with those questions in a different way.

This is why the search for homeomorphic equivalents, as set out by Panikkar, is a necessary one. Societies that envisage human dignity in a way that differs from the Western understanding of human rights also have a different way of envisaging the nature and role of democratic institutions. Therefore, to take seriously ‘value pluralism’ in its multiple dimensions requires making room for the pluralism of cultures, forms of life and political regimes. This means that to the recognition of a plurality of understandings of ‘human rights’, we should

add the recognition of a plurality of forms of democracy.

Next to human rights, the other contested issue in the debate about democracy refers to the nature of secularization/secularism. We should be aware that, even in the West, there exists an ongoing controversy about the relationship between democracy and secular society. For instance, as José Casanova has shown, an impasse has been reached in the debate between European and American thinkers over the different ways they envisage the nature of a secular society and the link between secularism and modernity.[10] On one side, there are the European sociologists, who believe that the decrease in the societal power of religious institutions and the decline in religious beliefs and practices are necessary components of the process of modernization; on the other side, there are the American sociologists of religion, who reject the theory of secularization because they do not see any decline in the religious beliefs and practices of the American people.

The question usually asked is whether secularization is a necessary feature of modernity. Should it be seen as a precondition for modern liberal democratic politics? I am going to leave this aside because I want to tackle another issue: even if we give an affirmative answer to this question in the context of Western democracy, does it mean that secularization is a normative condition for all forms of democracy? Or should we not envisage the possibility of democratic societies where such a process did not take place? Casanova asks, 'Can the theory of secularization as a particular theory of historical development be dissociated from general theories of global modernization? Can there be a non-Western, non-secular modernity?'[11]

I would like to pose a different, although related question: can there be a non-Western, non-secular form of democracy? If, as many people assert, the European concept of secularization is not particularly relevant for the United States, it is clear that it is even less relevant for other civilizations with very different modes of social organization. What could be its relevance, for instance, for worldly religions like Confucianism or Taoism? As Casanova notes, their model of transcendence can hardly be called 'religious' and they do not have ecclesiastical organization. In a sense, they have always been 'worldly' and do not need to undergo a process of secularization.[12]

Another relevant debate is the one among historians of political ideas concerning the nature of the Enlightenment. This debate has brought to the fore the existence of rival enlightenments and the plurality of possible answers to the question 'What is Enlightenment?' Ian Hunter, for instance, has argued that there was not one comprehensive German Enlightenment represented by the metaphysical approach of Kant. In his book *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and*

Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany, Hunter reconstructed an alternative, non-transcendental 'civil' Enlightenment represented by Pufendorf and Thomasius that proposed a very different way of dealing with the relationship between religion and politics and the sources of political obligation.[13] It is the metaphysical approach of Kant and Leibniz that gained hegemony, and their view became the accepted one. But, says Hunter, we should not see this as the expression of its superior rationality. As far as he is concerned, he sees the metaphysical tradition as being 'anti-political' and he finds in the civil tradition a more adequate conception of the world of politics.

An increasing number of theorists are now presenting secularism as a post-Christian way to relate to the role of religion. They characterize secularism as an Enlightenment concept influenced by a Protestant view of the nature of religion and the necessity to separate the public and the private. If this is the case, on what grounds could we claim that this separation must be a necessary element of any form of democracy? Should we not rather accept that the path followed by the West is not the only possible and legitimate one? Non-Western societies can follow different trajectories according to the specificity of their cultural traditions and religions.

Following this line of thought, James Tully had argued that the nature of the Enlightenment that was formulated within the Kantian tradition as a transcendental question should be de-transcendentalized and reformulated as a historical question.[14] Tully also suggests that this discussion should not be confined to the rival conceptions within Europe but should be extended to a broader dialogue with non-Western enlightenments. His position chimes with the approach of 'multiple modernities' that has been articulated by Charles Taylor, S.N. Eisenstadt, David Martin and Peter Wagner, among others. One of its central ideas is that epochal transitions, such as the one that we recognize as modernity, took place in different civilizations and have produced different results. Modernity should therefore be conceived as an open-ended horizon with space for multiple interpretations.

What is important in the discussion about rival enlightenments and multiple modernities is that it brings to the fore the political role played by the dominant narrative propagated by the West about its exemplary and privileged path of development. I agree with Dipesh Chakrabarty's claim that we must recognize 'that Europe's acquisition of the adjective "modern" for itself is an integral part of the story of European imperialism'.[15] In the case of democracy, it is clear that to present the Western form of democracy as being the 'modern' one has been a powerful rhetorical weapon used for some time by liberal democratic theorists to establish its superior form of rationality and its

universal validity. Martti Koskenniemi makes a related point in another context when he indicates in his book about international law that 'rational imperialism had proved to be a façade for cynical imperialism'.[16]

These are crucial issues for the left and it is important to question the dominant narrative about the superiority of the Western form of development. To acknowledge that the institutions of liberal democracy, with their specific vocabulary of human rights and their form of secularism, are the result of a contingent historical articulation in a specific cultural context should make us realize that there is no reason to present those institutions as a necessary condition of democracy. Drawing the consequences of my previous reflections in the field of political theory requires adopting a pluralist approach that envisages the possibility of multiple articulations of the democratic ideal of government by the people, articulations in which religion might have a different relationship to politics.

In many parts of the world, intellectuals and activists are already engaged in these kinds of reflections, working towards the elaboration of vernacular forms of democracy inscribed in their respective cultural and religious traditions. In the case of Islam, Noah Feldman has shown how the central question for many Islamic thinkers is how to envisage a constitutional order grounded in the sharia and devoted to the rule of law. He examines different attempts to visualize how a democratic Islamic state governed through Islamic law and Islamic values could reconcile divine sovereignty with the democratic principle of popular sovereignty.

Mainstream Islamism, he notes, has accepted the compatibility of the sharia and democracy, but differences exist concerning the mechanisms of reconciliation. The most prominent solution is 'for the constitution of the Islamic state to acknowledge divine sovereignty rather than establish popular sovereignty and then use it to enact Islamic law. On this theoretical model, the people function somewhat as the ruler did in the classical constitutional order: they accept the responsibility for implementing what God has commanded.'[17]

According to some interpretations, a democratically elected legislature responsible for enacting the provisions of the sharia needs to be supervised by a constitutionalized process of Islamic judicial review. Feldman does not ignore the difficulties that the establishment of such a democratic Islamic state will encounter, but he insists that it would be an error for the West to see such a project as a threat to democracy and to undermine the legitimacy of those who are thinking along those lines.

In the current conjuncture, after the fall of several dictatorial regimes in the Middle East, I find such advice particularly apposite. In countries like Tunisia

and Egypt, the Islamist parties now in power are facing the great challenge of establishing democratic institutions that correspond to the values of their people and that respect their traditions. With the move to establish new constitutions, the question of secularism has acquired a burning actuality, and it is vital that Western intellectuals and politicians allow those countries to elaborate their proper institutions without trying to impose a Western model. Many thinkers and activists in the Islamic political parties are aware of the need to rethink the relationship between religion and the state, and there is much discussion about the role of a 'civil state'. This discussion reveals, as Tariq Ramadan points out, that 'Islamist leaders seek to distance themselves from the notion of "secularism" seen in the Arab world as shorthand for Westernization, while steering clear of the idea of the "Islamic state" stigmatized by its cumbersome baggage of negative connotation'.[18] It is to be hoped that the confrontation between Islamists and secularists takes an agonistic form, not an antagonistic one, and that a common terrain among them is found so as to provide the basis of a 'conflictual consensus'. As Ramadan warns, the increasing polarization between the two camps prevents these countries from tackling the huge economic and social problems they currently face.

The question of how to envisage democracy is posed all over the world. In each case, the solution will have to take account of specific circumstances and cultural traditions. As far as Asia is concerned, one of the challenges might be the reconciliation of the democratic principle of popular sovereignty with Confucianism and Taoism. The idea of 'Asian values' is often rejected on the grounds that it is used as an excuse by authoritarian rulers to justify their domination. In some cases there might indeed be some truth to this claim, but this should not lead to dismissing such a notion outright.

With respect to Africa, it has often been pointed out that the conditions existing in many African countries are the consequence of the inadequate political system that was bequeathed to them by their former colonizers. Often, independence left them not as stable national states, but as a patchwork of ethnic fiefdoms, burdened with parliaments based on those of the former colonial power. In countries with so many ethnicities, languages, customs and cultures, multi-party democracy has led to fragmentation and bitterly divided politics. Many specialists recognize that forms of democracy more adapted to African customs are needed and that governments of national unity might be better suited for holding those countries together and fostering their development.

As Jack Goody notes, referring to the predicament of African states after

independence:

> For many a new state, the main political problem has not been the shift towards democracy, but that of establishing a central government over a territory that had none before. That remains very difficult where the state includes groups defined by primordial characteristics, tribal or religious, which may inhibit the establishment of a 'party' government in the western sense but does not exclude those groups themselves from having their own representative ('democratic') procedures.[19]

* * *

All of these questions are no doubt very controversial, and it is certainly not my intention to settle them. Besides not being competent to do so, I strongly believe that it is not up to Western political theorists to decide what democracy should look like in other parts of the world. What we can do is to criticize the claim made by the West that the only legitimate democracy is liberal democracy as the West currently interprets it: multi-party electoral democracy, accompanied by an individualistic conception of human rights, and of course freemarket policies. This is the model that many claim the moral duty to promote, or if necessary, even to impose. By bringing to the fore the contextual nature of liberal democracy and by criticizing its universalistic pretensions, political theorists can play a modest but useful role, helping to challenge the dangerous thesis that democratization requires Westernization.

To help envisage the world as a pluri-verse, we can find valuable insights in the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, who has forcefully argued that civilization implies the coexistence of cultures offering the maximum of diversity and maintaining their originality. In his view, the crucial value of having different cultures resides in what he calls the *'écarts différentiels'* (divergent variations) that exist among them. He insists on the necessity of preserving the diversity of cultures in a world threatened by homogeneity and uniformity. Against the universalists, he urges us to acknowledge that no part of humanity possesses a formula valid for the whole world and that a humanity unified by a single mode of life is inconceivable, since human culture would then become completely ossified.[20]

Levi-Strauss does not defend an essentialist conception of culture as something that is the necessary expression of a unified substance. But this does not stop him from recognizing that cultures have specific characteristics that make them distinguishable from each other and constitute their originality. This is what he means by the term *'écarts différentiels'*; it indicates that the identity of a culture is not to be found in a pre-given essence, but in its divergence from other cultures.

To think in terms of 'divergences' and not simply of differences is precisely what the term *'écarts différentiels'* suggests. As François Jullien indicates in his book *De l'universel*, the importance of distinguishing between 'divergence' and 'difference' is that divergence puts in tension what it separates. It shows how other possibilities can exist which cannot be reduced to mere variations of a common invariant.[21]

A pluralist perspective informed by the agonistic approach that I am advocating recognizes that divergences can be at the origin of conflicts, but it asserts that those conflicts should not necessarily lead to a 'clash of civilizations'. It suggests that the best way to avoid such a situation is the establishment of a multipolar institutional framework that would create the conditions for those conflicts to manifest themselves as agonistic confrontations between adversaries, instead of taking the form of antagonistic struggles between enemies.

There is a term forged by Derrida which I find very apposite in this context. In his reflections on hospitality, Derrida, following Benveniste, brings to the fore the deep ambivalence in the term 'hospitality', which comes from two words with the same roots: 'hospis' (host) and 'hostis' (enemy).[22] To express this ambivalence and indicate the entanglement of hostility and hospitality, Derrida coined the term 'hostipitality'. An agonistic pluralist approach should envisage the pluri-verse in terms of 'hostipitality', as the space where an agonistic encounter takes place between a diversity of poles which engage with each other without any one of them having the pretence of being the superior one. This agonistic encounter is a confrontation where the aim is neither the annihilation nor the assimilation of the other, and where the tensions between the different approaches contribute to enhancing the pluralism that characterizes a multipolar world.

1 See Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005, chapter 5.

2 Norberto Bobbio, 'Democracy and the International System' in *Cosmopolitan Democracy*, eds. Daniele Archibugi and David Held, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, 25.

3 Ibid., 38.

4 Ibid., 39.

5 Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, New York: Vintage, 2009.

6 Danilo Zolo, *Cosmopolis*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997, 135.

7 For this argument, see the introduction of *The Democratic Paradox*, London and New York: Verso, 2005.

8 Raimundo Panikkar, 'Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?', *Diogenes* 120, 1982, 81–82.

9 François Jullien, 'Universels, les droits de l'homme?', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 2008, 24.

10 José Casanova, 'Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective', *Hedgehog Review* 8:1–2, Spring/Summer 2006, 7–22.

11 Ibid., 10.

12 Ibid., 13.

13 Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

14 James Tully, 'Diverse Enlightenments', *Economy and Society* 32: 3, August 2003, 485–505.

15 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, 43.

16 Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870–1960*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 500.

17 Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, 119.

18 Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East*, London: Allen Lane, 2012, 115.

19 Jack Goody, *The Theft of History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 249.

20 See, for instance, Claude Levi-Strauss, *Race et Histoire*, Paris: Denoel, 1987.

21 François Jullien, *De l'universel, de l'informe, du common et du dialogue entre les cultures*, Paris: Fayard, 2008, 135.

22 See Jacques Derrida, 'Hostipitality' in *Acts of Religion*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, 356–420.

Chapter 3

An Agonistic Approach to the Future of Europe

The European project is today at a crossroad. Unfortunately, its survival cannot be taken for granted. Important decisions need to be made to secure the future of the European Union, and it is too early to know which direction they will take. What is certain is that their consequences will be far-reaching. There is a general agreement among the advocates of the EU that more integration is necessary, but there are wide disagreements about how to visualize such a process. The grounds of those disagreements are multiple and they depend on a variety of causes. Besides being the expression of political differences, they also entail philosophical divergences that need to be brought to the fore if we want to grasp what is at stake.

One important divergence concerns the place that national and regional identities should play in the future of the European Union and in its mode of integration. As many people have pointed out, contrary to all those who expected the generalization of post-conventional and post-national forms of identities, what we are witnessing today is a reinforcement of national identities. In addition, when this is not the case, it is not the supranational level that becomes more important, but instead regional forms of identifications. Thus while the nation-states might be losing some of their power and prerogatives – and it must be said that even with respect to the extent of this loss there are very serious disagreements among theorists – this is not accompanied by a disappearance of national forms of identification.

We should therefore accept that, at least for the foreseeable future, national forms of allegiance are unlikely to disappear. It is naïve to expect people to relinquish their national identity in favour of a post-national European one. To try to impose a form of European integration that negates this fact would be very dangerous and would only lead to negative reactions against the European project.

My concern, as a political theorist, is that many conceptions of a post-national Europe are informed by an individualistic and rationalistic framework that prevents us from grasping the process of collective identity formation and

from acknowledging the nature and role of national and regional forms of identification. In order to understand the depth of the challenge that European integration faces, we need an alternative approach that allows us to better envisage the variety of issues raised by the future of European integration. My argument will be organized around a double question. First, I will put forward an alternative to the dominant rationalistic approach, one that permits us to apprehend the way collective identities constitute themselves. Secondly, I will examine the implications of this approach for the European Union.

COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

Let's begin with the notion of the 'constitutive outside'. As we saw in chapter 1, this term was proposed by Henry Staten to describe the plurality of strategic moves that Jacques Derrida makes possible through 'undecidables' like 'supplement', 'trace' and 'différance'.[1] These, in turn, reveal that every objectivity, every identity, is constructed through the assertion of a difference, the determination of an 'other' that serves as its 'exterior', and the consequent establishment of a frontier between interior and exterior. With respect to collective identities, this means that the creation of a 'we' can only exist through the formulation of a 'they'. Indeed, every form of collective identity entails drawing a frontier between those who belong to the 'we' and those who are outside it.

Since my reflection is informed by the anti-essentialist approach to discourse theory that I elaborated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, written jointly with Ernesto Laclau, it is clear that I do not envisage this frontier as something that would stem from an already existing common essence found, for instance, in national belonging.[2] From the point of view of discourse theory, the problem is never that people need to acknowledge their true identity. Indeed, one of the key theses of this approach is that there is no essential identity, but only forms of identification.

This is, of course, also true when it comes to collective identities. While some of them, like national identities, might, thanks to long periods of historical sedimentation, appear as something natural, they are always contingent constructions made possible through a variety of practices, discourses and language games, and they can be transformed and re-articulated in different ways. This does not mean, as Habermas argues in his polemic with Dieter Grimm, that identities could be created through his paradigm of communicative rationality and a procedural method of legitimation.[3] This is a rationalistic conception that leaves aside what I take to be a crucial element: the role played by the affective dimension in the process of identification.

To grasp what is at stake in a process of identification, it is absolutely necessary to take account of the insights provided by psychoanalysis. Freud, for instance, brought to the fore the crucial role played by affective libidinal bonds in processes of collective identification. As he asserts in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego:* 'a group is clearly held together by a power of some kind: and to what power could this feat be better ascribed than to Eros, which holds together everything in the world.'[4] A collective identity, a 'we', is the result of a passionate affective investment that creates a strong identification among the members of a community. This dimension is completely overlooked by Habermas, as well as by all those who believe that we now live in an age where so-called 'post-conventional' identities have eliminated what they see as 'archaic passions' and who call for the establishment of a 'post-national' order ruled by cosmopolitan law and informed by communicative rationality.

There is another important aspect that is generally overlooked in the discussion among political theorists. Indeed, Freud also highlights the double nature of the libidinal drives that he calls Eros and Thanatos. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, for instance, he presents a view of society as perpetually threatened with disintegration because of the inclination to aggression present in human beings. According to him, 'men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked: they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness.'[5]

It is necessary to acknowledge this instinct of aggressiveness, and realize that civilization uses a variety of methods to check it. One method consists, through the mobilization of the libidinal instincts of love, in fostering communal bonds to establish a strong identification among the members of a community, thus binding them in a collective identity. This affective dimension plays a very important role in the case of national forms of identification, and this is why they cannot be easily discarded. They represent a crucial way of constituting collective identities, and historical experience shows how they provide an important terrain of distinction between 'we' and 'they'.

What are the possible types of relation that can exist between 'we' and 'they'? Freud was well aware that this relation could be one of enmity. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* he declared, 'it is always possible to bind together a considerable amount of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness.'[6] Once this has been recognized, the problem that we encounter is the following: If collective identities are always constructed on the mode of we/they, how can we avoid this relation becoming one of enmity?

This is one of the central issues that my agonistic model of democracy has addressed. How can we think of an agonistic model for Europe? What would an agonistic Europe look like? In fact, the creation of the European Union could be seen as a very good example of keeping antagonism at bay by constructing an agonistic configuration. Remember the intentions of people like Jean Monnet and Robert Schumann, who after the Second World War advocated the European project? Their aim was to create the institutions that would impede the emergence of another manifestation of antagonism between France and Germany. They understood that this could only be done by creating a 'we' that incorporated both countries, jointly with some others, in a common project.

The first institutional form of the 'we' was of an economic nature – the community of coal and steel. Other forms of integration were developed later. Of course, from the beginning Monnet and Schumann also had political as well as cultural concerns. They did not envisage, however, the disappearance of national identities and the erasure of their different and often conflicting interests. Their objective was that those involved in the European Community would, through their participation in shared projects, create among them a bond that made it less likely that they would again treat each other as enemies. This is exactly the purpose of my agonistic approach that proposes keeping antagonism at bay by establishing institutions allowing for conflict to take an agonistic form. There is no doubt that, envisaged from such a viewpoint, the European project has, so far, been successful, but we should be aware that it could always unravel.

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Let's now turn to the second question I want to examine. From this agonistic perspective, what are the lessons to be drawn for the way in which the process of European integration should proceed? According to which form of integration could Europe establish between its different nations a form of agonistic relation characterized by a 'conflicting consensus'? Such an agonistic Europe clearly has to acknowledge the multiplicity and diversity of collective identities existing in its midst, along with affective dimension. Its aim should be to create a bond among its different components, while nonetheless respecting their differences. Indeed, the challenge of European integration resides in combining unity and diversity, in creating a form of commonality that leaves room for heterogeneity.

This is why it is necessary, I submit, to relinquish all attempts to construct a homogeneous, post-national 'we' through which the diversity of national 'we'

would be overcome. The negation of the national 'we', or the fear that this could happen, is precisely what is at the origin of much of the resistances against European integration, leading to the emergence of multiple forms of antagonism among the different nations.

In thinking about what mode of integration is best suited for an agonistic Europe, I have found the reflections of the French legal theorist Olivier Beaud particularly useful. Beaud proposes to rediscover the notion of 'federal union', according to which federalism consists in a specific form of union among several political entities.[7] Conceived as a union of states, the aim of the federation is for the states to constitute jointly a new political entity in order to be able to maintain their political existence, and therefore to be able to remain as states. While acknowledging the need for a sort of European identity, and making a distinction between insiders and outsiders (the requisite of any form of federal union which always refers to a spatial entity with determinate borders), a federal union also conceives of the diversity of the component states as something that is valuable and that must be maintained. It takes account of the constitutive duality of Europe 'united in its diversity' and does not aim at eradicating national differences.

This way of envisaging the federal union should serve as a good argument for all those who remain attached to the existence of nation-states. Under conditions of globalization, there is no doubt that the different European states no longer face the numerous challenges they confront alone. Hence the need to create wider forms of union. Conceived as a 'federal union', the European Union could be the solution to this challenge. Instead of being seen as announcing the end of nation-states, it provides the conditions for their survival in a globalized world.

EUROPE OF NATIONS OR EUROPE OF REGIONS?

The issue that needs to be raised at this point concerns the prerogatives of the nation-state. Is the national level the only relevant and legitimate one for the exercise of democracy? Or should the diverse regions be accorded more power in a federal union than they currently are? In other words, should the European Union be visualized in terms of a federation of nation-states, or in terms of a federation of regions? Let me first remind you the view against which I am arguing – the proposal according to which the European Union should aim at creating, at the European level, a homogeneous *demos* that would be the bearer of sovereignty and that would provide the central place where democracy is exercised. This view is predicated on the transfer of people's allegiance from their nation-states to the Union. If one rejects such a view, this means that

democracy at the European level cannot be conceived on the mode of representative democracy writ large. But alternatives to this supranational Europe can take a variety of forms.

According to Kalypso Nicolaïdis, we should envisage the European Union on the mode of a 'demoï-cracy', a union of states and people that acknowledges the plurality and permanence of the different *demoï* that constitute its parts. It is a union that respects the national identity of its members, as it is expressed in their political and constitutional structures. The exercise of democracy at the level of the different nation-states is not going to be relinquished and replaced by a new set of institutions corresponding to a homogeneous European demos. Nicolaïdis stresses that this implies three important shifts with respect to the prevalent model: 'The first one: from a common identity towards shared identities; the second one: from a community of identity towards a community of projects; and finally: from a multilevel conception of governance towards multi-centered forms of governance.'[8]

Nicolaïdis's view dovetails with the agonistic conception that I am trying to elaborate because it takes account of the need to acknowledge and preserve the plurality of democratic spaces for the exercise of democracy and the need to constantly balance its two levels – the European and the national – recognizing the tension existing between them.

Some authors, however, go even further and put into question the privilege accorded to the nation-state. This is the case, for instance, with Robert Menasse, who declares that the problems currently facing the EU stem largely from the fact that it is a union of nation-states whose politics are driven by their own interests at the expense of the interests of their people. In his view, the current crisis is a political one, caused by the reluctance of the national governments to carry out the policies needed to bring about the forms of democratic governance required by the European project. Under the false pretence of defending the national interest, what they really defend are the interests of a small group of national elites whose political influence arises from their financial and economic power.[9] Menasse believes that the confrontation of national interests could lead to the break-up of the EU, and the only solution he sees is a real democratization of the EU under a new form of integration in which the different regions would play a decisive role.

Menasse does not address the question of how such a project could be institutionalized, and there is reason to be sceptical about the possibility, in the near future, of totally by-passing the nation-state. But it might be possible to envisage a mixed solution for which the views about federalism elaborated by Massimo Cacciari provide interesting insights.[10] The point of departure of

Cacciari's reflections is that the modern state is being torn apart as a consequence of two big movements: one micro-national, and another supranational. The modern state is torn from the inside under the pressure of regionalist movements, and from the outside as a consequence of the growth of supranational powers and institutions and of the increasing power of world finance and transnational corporations. The answer to such a situation is what he calls 'federalism from the bottom', in opposition to 'federalism from the top'. This federalism from the bottom would recognize the specific identity of different regions and different cities, not in order to isolate them and separate them from each other, but with the aim of establishing the conditions of an autonomy conceived and organized on the basis of multiple relations of exchange between those regions and cities.

What Cacciari advocates can be conceived as a type of federal union in which the component units would not be limited to nation-states and in which the regions would also play an important role. From the point of view of an agonistic model for Europe, I find particularly interesting his claim that such a union would manifest a form of autonomy exercised in systems which are integrated in a conflictive mode, and that it would combine solidarity and competition. Incorporating Cacciari's proposals, we could imagine a European Union that would not only be a 'demoï-cracy' composed of nation-states, but one where there would be a multiplicity of different kinds of *demoï*, where democracy could be exercised at different levels and in a multiplicity of ways. Such a view recognizes and articulates different forms of collective identities, not only national but also regional ones. It also acknowledges the increasing importance of cities and their new modes of cooperation. Cacciari also points to the possibility of organizing regional units on a transnational level in many places where cultural or economic forms of unity exist, as is the case, for instance, at the borders between France and Spain, France and Italy, and Austria and Italy.

This way of visualizing the European Union allows for an effective pluralism of democratic units and permits envisaging a real 'agonistic' mode of relation between them. While nations are important, it is necessary to acknowledge that there are other important forms of allegiance and other spaces for democratic participation. An agonistic European Union should give people the possibility of participating in a variety of demoi, where they can exercise their democratic rights without having to discard their national and regional allegiances.

WHICH DEMOCRACY: DELIBERATIVE OR AGONISTIC?

With respect to democracy, there is another aspect that needs to be discussed.

Most of the theorists who have tried to elaborate models for enhancing democracy in the EU – and not only those who advocate the creation of a supranational state – work within the paradigm of deliberative democracy. They all assert that to solve the problem of 'democratic deficit' and to ground the EU's democratic legitimacy, what is needed is the establishment of a European public sphere in which citizens would be able, thanks to a variety of deliberative procedures, to become informed and exchange opinions so as to develop a public spirit. They believe that the key issues concern the creation of informed arenas of dialogue in which people can deliberate and reach an agreement concerning the public good. To be sure, there are many varieties of deliberative proposals for the EU; however, they all share the idea that through informed participation and discussion, citizens should be able to reach an agreement about the best policies.

An important part of my work in the field of democratic political theory has been dedicated to criticizing the deliberative democracy model for its rationalist and individualistic framework. In *The Democratic Paradox*, for instance, I examined its two main versions–the Rawlsian and the Habermasian – and showed how they are unable to acknowledge the antagonistic dimension of 'the political'.[11] Both Rawls and Habermas assert, albeit in different ways, that the aim of democracy is to establish a rational agreement in the public sphere. Their theories differ with respect to the procedures of deliberation that are needed to reach it, but their objective is the same: to reach a consensus, without exclusion, on the 'common good'. Although they claim to be pluralist, it is clear that theirs is a pluralism whose legitimacy is only recognized in the private sphere and that it has no constitutive place in the public one. They are adamant that democratic politics requires the elimination of passions from the public sphere, and this is, of course, why they cannot apprehend the process of the constitution of political identities.

Those shortcomings of the deliberative model are also found in the diverse attempts to use this model to enhance democracy in the EU. Therefore, I feel the necessity to stress that, when we envisage the different forms of democratic participation to be established at a variety of levels in the European demoicracy, it is important to conceive them not on the deliberative mode, but on the adversarial agonistic one. Once the crucial role played by affects and passions in politics is acknowledged, the central question becomes how to find ways to mobilize them towards democratic designs. This, in my view, requires a politicization of the European project that would allow the citizens of the various *demoï* to engage in an adversarial confrontation between different ways to envisage the nature of the EU and its place in the world.

However, for such an adversarial confrontation to take place, something 'common' needs to exist among the European citizens, so as to provide the framework of the 'conflictual consensus' that is the precondition for an agonistic confrontation. How to conceive this common bond? Jonathan White addresses this question in an article where he examines the diverse ways in which the common is conceptualized by different approaches.[12] Distinguishing between a minimalist, a maximalist and a mixed conception of the common, he brings to the fore the consequences of each of these formulations for envisaging the nature of the European polity. For the minimalist conception, the collective bond is constituted by shared material and security interests, and the principal features of the European polity are the common market and the existence of an economic and monetary union. The maximalists object that a commercial bond is not enough to constitute a political community and claim that the common needs to be secured by a cultural bond. To be sure, as White points out, there are many ways to visualize this cultural bond, and not all of them suppose essentializing inherited attributes. But, in his view, even the approaches that imagine that those bonds are constituted by shared values and principles adopted on the basis of reasoned deliberation are inadequate because they are not conducive to contestatory politics and active citizenship. This is why he argues in favour of a political conception of the common that calls for an active engagement of citizens in addressing the important shared problems that affect them. Seeing the EU as a 'community of shared projects' and the common as constituted by a diversity of problems and matters of concern, we can envisage numerous lines of intersection between a variety of constituencies, establishing the terrain of a variety of we/they confrontations. He stresses that these problems 'would not be "common" in the sense of their being a consensus that every such problem affects everyone alike in the political community: on the contrary, a we-they dynamic would be involved, such that it is assumed that there are opponents to "people like us" living within the political community whose position on those problems is quite different, or who may indeed be generative of them. Rather than binding all citizens to one another in an image of unity, the problems of the political common would pit some against others in a web of allegiances and conflicts.'[13]

By pointing out the shortcomings of the deliberative perspective and by visualizing the bonds linking the EU members in a way that favours political contestation, White's proposals for envisaging the common in a political way clearly dovetail with my own agonistic approach. To conceive in such a way the kind of common bond which is necessary to link together the different demoi in the European Union could also provide the basis for an effective politicization of European politics.

When it comes to examining the possible modes of such a politicization, we find useful ideas in James Tully's discussion of the different modes of imagining democratic negotiations.[14] Arguing in favour of an open-ended approach that recognizes a multiplicity of actors and spaces of disputation and where procedures will not have a meta-democratic status but will also be contestable, Tully also insists on the need for distinguishing between two different forms of democratic negotiation. The first one involves the activities of challenging and modifying prevailing norms, while the second occurs when diverse members share the same norms but act differently in accord with them. In Tully's view, this second form points to the existence of a diversity of practices within a field of shared rules, a feature that has not received enough attention because political theorists tend to believe that norms can be applied and followed in only one right way. I agree with Tully's defence of an open-ended approach and with the importance he attributes to this second form of negotiation. I take both of his suggestions to be crucial for creating the conditions of an agonistic confrontation.

AN EUROPEAN ALTERNATIVE TO NEO-LIBERALISM

White and Tully, albeit in different ways, stress the importance of devising the democratic debate in a way that allows for conflicting interpretations of shared ethico-political principles and that recognizes the legitimacy of disagreement. This is indeed a crucial point for opening among European citizens an agonistic confrontation about the future of the EU. I am convinced that, in the present conjuncture, such a confrontation is absolutely vital. Many people on the left are beginning to doubt the possibility of constructing, within the framework of the EU, an alternative to the neo-liberal model of globalization. The EU is increasingly perceived as being an intrinsically neo-liberal project that cannot be reformed. It seems futile to try transforming its institutions, and the only solution that remains is to exit. Such a pessimistic view is no doubt the result of the fact that all attempts to challenge the prevalent neo-liberal rules are constantly presented as expressions of anti-European attacks against the very existence of the Union. Without the possibility of making legitimate criticisms of the current neo-liberal policies, it is not surprising that a growing number of people are turning to euroscepticism. They believe that it is the European project itself that is the cause of our current predicament, and they fear that more European integration can only mean a reinforcement of neo-liberal hegemony. Such a position endangers the survival of the European project, and the only way to stop its expansion is by creating the conditions for a democratic contestation within the European Union.

Things, however, have not always been so grim. A few decades ago the European project still had the capacity to awaken enthusiasm and to express the desires and aspirations of many people. What has happened to bring about this change? Several explanations have been offered. They range from the geo-political transformations linked to the end of the Cold War, to the resistances to a too-rapid enlargement of the Union imposed from the top without popular consultation. The criticism most often rehearsed is that the European Union lacks legitimacy and suffers from a democratic deficit. There are no doubt serious problems in this area, and it is clear that the situation has been exacerbated by the financial crisis and the EU's austerity-heavy answer to it.

In my view, what lies at the bottom of the disaffection with the EU is the absence of a project that could foster a strong identification among the citizens of Europe and provide an objective around which to mobilize their political passions in a democratic direction. The EU is currently composed of consumers, not of citizens. It has been mainly constructed around a common market, and it has never really created an European common will. No wonder that, in times of economic crisis and austerity policies, some people begin to question its utility, forgetting what has been its important achievement in bringing peace to the continent. What is needed is to foster popular allegiance to the EU through the elaboration of a socio-political project. In my view, such a project should aim at offering an alternative to the neo-liberal model that has prevailed in recent decades. This model is now in crisis, but a different one is not yet available. We could say, following Gramsci, that what we are witnessing is an 'organic crisis' in which the old model cannot continue but the new one is not yet born. Alas, the left is not able to take advantage of this situation because it has accepted for too long the idea that there was no alternative to neo-liberal globalization. Indeed, in many countries, centre-left governments have played an important role in the process of deregulation and privatization which has contributed to the consolidation of neo-liberal hegemony. And it cannot be denied that the European institutions have their share of responsibility in the current crisis. It is a mistake, however, to present this crisis as a crisis of the European project. It is a crisis of its neo-liberal incarnation, and the current attempts to solve it by more neo-liberal policies cannot succeed.

To recognize that it is the neo-liberal turn which is at the origin of the lack of enthusiasm towards the EU suggests that elaborating an alternative could also contribute to restoring the legitimacy of the European project. How should this be envisaged? Many left economists are busy elaborating concrete proposals, and it is not my place here to engage with them. The economic model is of course crucial, but to create a Europe of citizens requires more

than economic measures, and my main concern is the kind of political vision that needs to inform the economic proposals. The first step is for the EU to clearly distance itself from the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism. This would mean reconnecting with the social-democratic tradition which had been at the core of European politics since the Second World War. Obviously, this is not sufficient. Many things have changed, and one cannot simply go back to traditional social democracy. After decades of neo-liberal policies, it is not surprising to find nostalgia for the era of the welfare state. But let's not forget the shortcomings of social democracy, and the fact that many of those shortcomings laid the bases for the success of neo-liberal parties. For instance, there is no doubt that the bureaucratic implementation of redistributive policies alienated the very people who profited from them, making them susceptible to neo-liberal rhetoric. More importantly, it is necessary to realize that the current crisis is a civilizational one, not restricted to economic and financial factors but also affecting our very model of development. What is at stake is a new vision which retrieves the positive aspects of social democracy in the field of social rights but goes much further in several crucial areas, integrating economic questions with social, environmental and political ones.

A crucial element in this post-social-democratic ecological project should be to question the widely accepted thesis that free trade constitutes progress and to defend a left-wing form of European protectionism. It is remarkable that, except for some sectors of the alter-globalization movements, there seems to be a general agreement about the benefits that free trade is supposed to have brought to the whole planet. The reality is exactly the opposite. A good example can be seen in what has been happening as a result of neo-liberal globalization. One of the consequences of the free-trade dogma has been that many big corporations have stopped producing based on domestic demand and have oriented their production towards exportation. This has a double negative effect: interior and exterior. In the countries where the enterprises are located, the sectors controlled by the multinationals are not concerned with the domestic market and with the need to maintain a certain level of local employment in order to sell their products. Their objective is to find the cheapest possible workforce so as to maximize their profits. This has led them to favour the delocalizations that have contributed to a growing level of unemployment in several countries.

With respect to many of the countries where the products are exported, the consequences of free trade have been dramatic. An increasing number of vernacular industries have been destroyed, as local producers are unable to compete with cheap imports. This, in turn, forces an increasing number of people to emigrate with the hope of finding ways to survive. When those

immigrants arrive in Europe, they are perceived as a threat by Europeans who do not see that it is their own policies which are at the origin of the problem.

The only way out of this vicious circle is to debunk the ideology of free trade and to envisage economic development according to a regional perspective. Several left theorists and politicians in France have recently argued that some measures of European protectionism would be an important step towards establishing a different model of development that would be more respectful of the environment.[15] They claim that this could help European countries to constitute a new industrial base of an ecological and social nature. This would not be a protectionism driven by fear but by solidarity, and it would have positive consequences not only for Europeans but also for other regions. Indeed, in South America, several progressive governments critical of free trade have recently defended similar ideas, stressing that the negotiations concerning commercial relations between the EU and Latin America have to recognize the need to protect domestic industries and to take account of the asymmetry existing between their economies and those of the EU.

Within such a perspective, one strategic question concerns the domain of food production. The world crisis in food prices that we witnessed in 2008 has led to an important debate which has generated several interesting proposals. These proposals insist on a respect for the right to food sovereignty and call for an international regulation of exchanges, based on solidarity and the preservation of natural resources. Movements like Via Campesina are very active in this field, and they have brought to the fore the political dimension of the struggle, designating the big multinational agribusiness corporations as their main adversary. To be sure, a sustainable politics will have to challenge the existing structure of power relations, and this is why it must be articulated within a wider political project. Such a project cannot be a merely national one – it needs to be formulated at the European level. It is therefore vital for the left in all European countries to join forces to fight for an alternative.

We should be aware that resistance to a sustainable politico-economic project will come, not only from the powerful but also from many less favoured sectors. Indeed, it will require a profound transformation in the way of life of advanced industrial societies whose prosperity and high level of welfare have always been dependent on the exploitation of non-Western societies. The debate about climate change has already revealed how it will not be possible to tackle the issue of global warming without important changes in our way of life. But this is only one of the areas where sacrifices will need to be made. We will have to come to terms with the fact that the reduction of global inequalities will imply crucial changes in our consumerist mode of life. A truly

Gramscian 'intellectual and moral reform' is called for, and this represents a real challenge for the Western left. For a long time, the project of the left has been conceived in terms of a more equal distribution of domestic resources and the possibility for less favoured groups to partake in the fruits of national prosperity. A democratic, sustainable politics cannot follow those lines anymore. To be able to address global issues, left politics will need the courage to tell Western citizens that they cannot go on living according to the previous model of development. It certainly won't be easy. This is why most centre-left parties have so far preferred to pose the question of global justice in a moralistic way – either through 'charity' measures or by mobilizing compassion through big media events. Another attitude consists in fighting against policies to control immigration or in calling for free movement of people around the world in compensation for the free movement of capital. To address the problem in a political, not a moral, way requires going to its very core, challenging the basic tenets of our current consumerist model, not merely proposing measures to remedy its negative effects.

A final word about the role that the European Union should play in the global context. The multipolar view that I am advocating takes issue with the conception of the EU as the vanguard in the establishment of a cosmopolitan order based on the universalization of liberal democracy. In chapter 2, I made clear that I disagree with the theoretical premises that inform such a vision. The world is a pluri-verse, not a universe, and the Western model represents only one possible political form of life among others. Instead of the vanguard in the unification of the world, the EU should be visualized as a regional pole in this multipolar world. Such a pole does not have any ontological privilege due to its supposedly superior form of rationality or morality, but that does not mean that it cannot play a positive role. By promoting a pluralist approach, it could contribute to fostering an agonistic world order that acknowledges the diversity of forms of life and modes of organization. To be sure, such a world order will not bring 'eternal peace', but it will no doubt reduce the opportunities for antagonistic forms of confrontation.

1 Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985.

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

3 Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998, 155–164.

4 Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVIII, ed. & trans. James Strachey, London: Vintage, 2001, 92.

5 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* in ibid., Vol. XXI, 111.

6 Ibid., 114.

7 Olivier Beaud, 'La question de l'homogeneite dans une federation', Lignes 13, 2004, 114. Those ideas are developed in Olivier Beaud, *Theorie de la Federation*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007.

8 Kalypso Nicolaïdis, ‘Demos et Demoi: Fonder la constitution’, *Lignes* 13, 2004, 98–99.

9 Robert Menasse, *Der Europaische Landbote*, Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2012, 59.

10 See a presentation of his ideas in ‘The Philosopher Politician of Venice: Interview with Massimo Cacciari’, by Yvon le Bot, with Marco Semo and Anna Spadolini, *Soundings* 17, 2001, 25–34.

11 Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London and New York: Verso, 2005, chapter 4.

12 Jonathan White, ‘Europe and the Common’, *Political Studies* 58:1, 2010, 104–122.

13 Ibid., 114.

14 James Tully, ‘A New Kind of Europe? Democratic Integration in the European Union’, *Critical Review of International and Political Philosophy* 10:1, 2007, 71–86.

15 See, for instance, Emmanuel Todd, *Après la democratie*, Paris: Gallimard, 2008, and Armand Montebourg, *Votez pour la demondialisation!*, Paris: Flammarion, 2011.

Chapter 4

Radical Politics Today

The years in which the hegemony of neo-liberalism was unchallenged have fortunately come to a close. With the multiplication of protest movements, we are witnessing a renewed interest in a type of radical politics that might be able to bring about an alternative to the current neo-liberal globalization. There is, however, no agreement on the modalities and the objectives of such a politics. What kind of strategy should be implemented? How should such a movement deal with existing institutions?

In this chapter I will discuss two different proposals: the first, which is very influential among social movements, promotes a strategy of 'withdrawal from institutions'; the second, which is the one that I advocate, calls for an 'engagement with institutions'. To start, I will examine the main divergences between these two proposals regarding political strategy, and then I will scrutinize their respective philosophical frameworks. This will allow me to show how the political disagreements between those two conceptions stem from their different ontologies.

CRITIQUE AS WITHDRAWAL FROM

The model of radical politics put forward by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire, Multitude* and *Commonwealth* calls for a break with modernity and the elaboration of a different approach that they first termed 'post-modern', but which they now prefer to designate as 'altermodern'.[1] In their view, such a break is required because of the crucial transformations undergone by our societies since the last decades of the twentieth century. These transformations, which they present as the consequences of globalization and of the transition from fordism to post-fordism – a change in the work process brought about by workers' struggles – can be briefly summarized in the following points:

1. Sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty, which they call 'Empire', has replaced the Imperial Age that was based on the attempt by nation-states to extend their sovereignty

beyond their borders. In contrast to what happened in the stage of imperialism, the current Empire has no territorial centre of power and no fixed boundaries; it is a decentered and deterritorialized apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm with open, expanding frontiers.

2. These transformations are linked to the transformation of the capitalist mode of production in which the role of industrial factory labour has been reduced and replaced by communicative, cooperative and affective labour. In the post-modernization of the global economy, the creation of wealth tends towards biopolitical production. The object of the rule of Empire, therefore, is social life in its entirety, the paradigmatic form of biopower.

3. We are witnessing the passage from a 'disciplinary society' to a 'society of control' characterized by a new paradigm of power. In the disciplinary society, which corresponds to the first phase of capitalist accumulation, command is constructed through a diffuse network of dispositifs or apparatuses that produce and regulate customs, habits and productive practices with the help of disciplinary institutions like prisons, factories, asylums, hospitals, schools and others.

The society of control, in contrast, is one in which mechanisms of command become immanent within the social field. The modes of social integration and exclusion are increasingly interiorized through mechanisms that directly organize the brains and bodies of the citizens. This new paradigm of power is 'biopolitical' in nature. What is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself.

4. Hardt and Negri assert that the notions of 'mass intellectuality', 'immaterial labour' and 'general intellect' help us to grasp the relation between social production and biopower. The central role previously occupied by the labour-power of mass factory workers in the production of surplus-value is today increasingly filled by intellectual, immaterial and communicative labour-power. The figure of immaterial labour involved in communication, cooperation and the reproduction of affects occupies an increasingly central position in the schema of capitalist production.

5. In the passage to post-modernity and biopolitical production, labour-power has become increasingly collective and social. A new term is needed to refer to this collective worker. It is the 'Multitude'. The construction of Empire is seen as a response to the various machines of power and the struggles of the Multitude. Multitude, they say, called Empire into being, and globalization, in so far as it operates a real deterritorialization of the previous structures of exploitation and control, is a condition of the liberation of the Multitude.

Incorporating, although not always in a faithful way, the analyses of Foucault and Deleuze, Hardt and Negri claim 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. This style of rule permits 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. They will contribute to the formation of a new set of social relations that will finally replace the capitalist system.

Indeed, Hardt and Negri are adamant that the passage to Empire opens new possibilities for the liberation of the Multitude. The creative forces of the Multitude that sustain Empire are capable of constructing a counter-empire, an alternative political organization of the global flows of exchange and globalization, so as to reorganize them and direct them towards new ends.

As outlined in his book *Grammar of the Multitude*, the analyses of Paolo Virno, another post-operaist thinker, dovetail in many respects with those of Hardt and Negri.[2] But there are also some significant differences. For instance, Virno is much less sanguine about the future. While Hardt and Negri have a messianic vision of the role of the Multitude, which will necessarily bring down Empire and establish an 'Absolute Democracy', Virno sees current developments as an ambivalent phenomenon, acknowledging the new forms of subjection and precarization that are typical of the post-fordist stage.

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 the generalization of immaterial labour as a type of 'spontaneous communism' like Hardt and Negri, Virno tends to see post-fordism as a manifestation of the 'communism of capital'. He notes that, today, capitalistic initiatives orchestrate for their own benefits precisely those material and cultural conditions that could, in other conditions, have opened the way for a potential communist future.

When it comes to envisaging how the Multitude could liberate itself, Virno declares that the post-fordist era requires the creation of a 'Republic of the Multitude', by which he understands a sphere of common affairs that is no longer state-run. He proposes two key terms to grasp the type of political action characteristic of the Multitude: 'exodus' and 'civil disobedience'. 'Exodus' is a fully-fledged model of political action capable of confronting the challenges of modern politics. It consists in a mass defection from the state aiming at developing the 'publicness of Intellect' outside of work and in

opposition to it. This requires the development of a non-state public sphere and a radically new type of democracy framed in terms of the construction and experimentation of forms of non-representative and extra-parliamentary democracy organized around leagues, councils and soviets.

The democracy of the Multitude expresses itself in an ensemble of acting minorities that never aspire to transform themselves into a majority and develop a power that refuses to become government. It is 'acting in concert', and while tending to dismantle the supreme power, it is not inclined to become state in its turn. This is why civil disobedience needs to be emancipated from the liberal tradition within which it is generally located. In the case of the Multitude, 'civil disobedience' does not mean ignoring a specific law because it does not conform to the principles of the constitution. This would still be a way of expressing loyalty to the State. What should be at stake is a radical disobedience that puts into question the State's very faculty of command.

Regarding the type of political action better suited to the liberation of the Multitude, there is no fundamental difference between Virno and Hardt and Negri, who also advocate desertion and exodus. Whereas in the disciplinary era sabotage was the fundamental form of resistance, in the era of imperial control they claim that it is desertion. It is indeed through desertion, through the evacuation of the places of power, that they think that battles against Empire might be won. Desertion and exodus are for them a powerful form of class struggle against imperial post-modernity.

Another important point of agreement among Hardt, Negri and Virno concerns their conception of the democracy of the Multitude. To be sure, Virno never uses the term 'absolute democracy', but in both cases we find a rejection of the model of representative democracy and the drawing of a stark opposition between the Multitude and the People. The problem with the notion of the People, they claim, is that it is represented as a unity, with one will, and that it is linked to the existence of the State. The Multitude, on the contrary, shuns political unity. It is not representable because it is a singular multiplicity. It is an active self-organizing agent that can never achieve the status of a juridical personage and can never converge in a general will. It is anti-state and anti-popular. Virno, like Hardt and Negri, claims that the democracy of the Multitude cannot be conceived anymore in terms of a sovereign authority that is representative of the People, and that new forms of democracy which are non-representative are needed.

Radical politics is envisaged, according to this approach, in terms of a 'withdrawal' from existing institutions so as to foster the self-organization of the Multitude. Such a strategy is justified by the claim that, under the new

post-fordist forms of production characterized by the centrality of immaterial labour, capitalists are no longer necessary for the organization of production. They have become parasites who simply appropriate the value produced by the general intellect, without playing any positive role. In a theme reminiscent of Marx's assertion that capitalism is its own grave-digger, they see the development of 'cognitive capitalism' as creating the conditions for the dismissal of those parasitic capitalists. The Multitude should accelerate this process by disengaging itself from all the institutions through which capitalists desperately try to keep it enslaved.

CRITIQUE AS HEGEMONIC ENGAGEMENT WITH

In contrast to this strategy of 'withdrawal', I want to offer a different conception of radical politics envisaged in terms of 'engagement' with institutions, with the aim of bringing about a different hegemony. I agree with the previous writers on the need to take account of the crucial transformations in the mode of the regulation of capitalism brought about by the transition from fordism to post-fordism. In addition, it is necessary not to judge those transformations as the mere consequence of technological progress. In my view, however, this transition is better apprehended within the framework of the theory of hegemony. Many factors have contributed to this transition, and it is necessary to recognize their complex articulation.

The problem with the operaist and post-operaist viewpoints is that they tend to see the transition from fordism to post-fordism as driven by one single logic: workers' resistance to the process of exploitation, which forces the capitalists to reorganize the process of production and to move to post-fordism, where immaterial labour is central. For them, capitalism can only be reactive; they refuse to accept the creative role played by both capital and labour. What they deny is in fact the role played in this transition by the hegemonic struggle.

To envisage the transition from fordism to post-fordism in terms of an hegemonic struggle means abandoning the view that one single logic – workers' struggles – is at work in the evolution of the work process. It means acknowledging the pro-active role played by capital in this transition. In order to grasp this role, we can find interesting insights in the work of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello. In their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, they bring to light the way in which capitalists managed to use the demands for autonomy made by the new movements that developed in the '60s, harnessing them in the development of the post-fordist networked economy and transforming them into new forms of control.[3] What they call 'artistic critique' to refer to the aesthetic strategies of the counter-culture – the search for authenticity, the

ideal of self-management, the anti-hierarchical exigency – was used to promote the conditions required by the new mode of capitalist regulation, replacing the disciplinary framework characteristic of the fordist period.

From my point of view, what is important in this approach is that it shows how a crucial aspect of the transition from fordism to post-fordism consisted in a process of discursive re-articulation of existing discourses and practices. This is why it allows us to visualize this transition in terms of an hegemonic intervention. To be sure, Boltanski and Chiapello never use this vocabulary, but their analysis is a clear example of what Gramsci called 'hegemony through neutralization' or 'passive revolution', a situation where demands which challenge the hegemonic order are appropriated by the existing system so as to satisfy them in a way that neutralizes their subversive potential.

When the transition from fordism to post-fordism is apprehended within such a framework, we can understand it as an hegemonic move by capital to re-establish its leading role and restore its legitimacy, which had been seriously challenged in the late '60s and early '70s. This will in turn permit us to envisage how to challenge the new capitalist order by launching a counter-hegemonic offensive in a variety of fields where the nodal points securing the new post-fordist mode of regulation of capitalism have been established. This is a complex process that cannot merely consist in separating the different elements whose discursive articulation constitutes the structure of the current hegemony. The second moment, the moment of re-articulation, is crucial. Otherwise, we will be faced with a chaotic situation of pure dissemination, leaving the door open for attempts at re-articulation by non-progressive forces. Indeed, we have many historical examples of situations in which the crisis of the dominant order led to right-wing solutions. The critique and disarticulation of the existing hegemony cannot be conceived in terms of desertion because it should go hand in hand with a process of re-articulation.

This double moment, of dis-articulation and re-articulation, is not only missed by the exodus theorists. It is also missed by all the approaches that rely on the idea of reification or false consciousness, which believe that it is enough to lift the weight of ideology in order to bring about a new order free from oppression and power.

Another point of divergence between the two strategies comes from the importance that hegemonic politics attributes to the establishment of a 'chain of equivalences' between the various democratic demands. It is clear that those demands do not necessarily converge and they can even be in conflict with each other. To transform them into claims that will challenge the existing structure of power relations, they need to be articulated politically.

What is at stake is the creation of a common will, a 'we', and this requires the determination of a 'they'. This need for a 'they' to secure the unity of the common will is neglected by the various advocates of the Multitude, who believe that the Multitude is endowed with a natural unity and that it does not need political articulation. According to Virno, for instance, the singularities that constitute the Multitude already have something in common: the general intellect. His critique of the notion of the People (shared by Hardt and Negri) as being homogeneous and expressed in a unitary general will which does not leave room for multiplicity is totally misplaced when directed at the construction of the People through a chain of equivalence. Indeed, in this case we are dealing with a form of unity that respects diversity and does not erase differences. A relation of equivalence does not eliminate difference – that would simply be identity. It is only to the extent that democratic differences are opposed to forces or discourses that negate all of them that these differences can be substituted for each other. This is why the construction of a collective will requires designating an adversary.

Such an adversary cannot be defined in broad general terms like 'Empire', or for that matter 'Capitalism', but in terms of nodal points of power that need to be targeted and transformed in order to create the conditions for a new hegemony. It is a 'war of position' (Gramsci) that has to be launched in a multiplicity of sites, and this requires establishing a synergy between a plurality of actors: social movements, parties and trade unions. What is at stake is not any 'withering away' of the state or of the variety of institutions through which pluralism is organized. Rather, through a combination of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggles we must bring about a profound transformation of those institutions, so as to make them a vehicle for the expression of the manifold of democratic demands which would extend the principle of equality to as many social relations as possible. This is how radical politics is envisaged by the hegemonic approach, and such a project requires an agonistic engagement with the institutions.

The important democratic advances made in recent years by progressive governments in South America testify to the possibility of making profound institutional transformations through representative forms of politics. In Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina and Brazil, left-wing governments have been able to challenge neo-liberal forces and to implement a set of reforms which have significantly improved the condition of the popular sectors. This was made possible by the state's collaboration with a variety of social movements. These experiences prove that, contrary to what is claimed by the exodus theorists, the state and representative institutions, instead of being an obstacle to social change, can contribute to it in a crucial way.

The case of Argentina is particularly interesting for my argument. In the exodus literature, it is common to find a celebration of the *piqueteros*, the movement of impoverished, mainly unemployed workers who in the end of the 1990s began to organize road-blocking pickets to protest against the neo-liberal policies of President Carlos Menem. During the economic crisis of 2001–2002, they organized themselves in cooperatives and were very active in the popular protests that brought down the de la Rúa government in 2001.

With their motto 'Que se vayan todos' (Away with them all) they proclaimed their rejection of all politicians and called for a self-organization of the popular sectors. Post-operaist theorists see in the *piqueteros* a paradigmatic example of the political expression of the Multitude and present their refusal to collaborate with political parties as a model for the strategy of desertion. But they do not seem to realize that what the movement of the *piqueteros* shows is precisely the limits of such a strategy. To be sure, they played a role in bringing down a president, but when the time came to offer an alternative, their refusal to participate in the elections rendered them unable to influence the further course of events. If it had not been for the fact that Nestor Kirchner won the elections and began to implement progressive measures to restore the Argentinian economy and improve the conditions of the poor, the outcome of the popular protests could have been completely different.

The democratic progress made in Argentina under Nestor Kirchner and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner has been possible thanks to the synergy that was established between the government and a series of social movements (among them some *piquetero* groups that accepted Kirchner's offer to collaborate with him), with the aim of tackling the social and socio-economic challenges confronting the country. Far from providing a successful example of the strategy of desertion, what the Argentinian case reveals are the shortcomings of such a strategy. It brings to light the importance of combining parliamentary with extra-parliamentary struggles in a common fight to transform the configuration of power within the institutional framework.

It is for that reason that, despite having sympathy for recent forms of protest like the *Indignados* in Spain or the various forms of 'Occupy', there is reason to be concerned about the type of anti-institutional strategy that they have adopted and that is inspired by the exodus model. To be sure, these movements are very diverse and not all of them are influenced by the exodus theorists, but many of them share these theorists' total rejection of representative democracy. Moreover, they also believe in the possibility for social movements, on their own, to bring about a new type of society where a 'real' democracy could exist without the need for the state or other forms of political institutions. Without

any institutional relays, they will not be able to bring about any significant changes in the structures of power. Their protests against the neo-liberal order risk being soon forgotten.

IMMANENTISM VERSUS RADICAL NEGATIVITY

Having contrasted the political strategies of the 'withdrawal from' and 'engagement with' approaches, I would now like to scrutinize their respective philosophical postulates. My claim is that the kind of radical politics advocated by the exodus approach proceeds from a flawed understanding of politics, one that does not acknowledge 'the political' with its ineradicable dimension of antagonism. The strategy of exodus advocated by Hardt and Negri is based on an ontology of immanence whose primary ontological terrain is one of multiplicity.

The problem with this immanentist ontology is its inability to give an account of radical negativity, i.e. antagonism. True, negation is present in the work of these theorists, and they even use the term 'antagonism', but this negation is not envisaged as radical negativity. It is either conceived on the mode of dialectical contradiction or simply as a real opposition. In fact, the strategy of exodus is the reformulation in a different vocabulary of the idea of communism as it was found in Marx, and there are clearly analogies between the views of the post-operaists and traditional Marxist conceptions. Of course, in the case of the post-operaists, it is no longer the proletariat but the Multitude which is the privileged political subject. But in both cases, the State is seen as a monolithic apparatus of domination that cannot be transformed. It has to 'wither away' in order to leave room for a reconciled society beyond law, power and sovereignty. Indeed, absolute democracy presupposes the possibility of a redemptive leap into a society beyond politics and sovereignty where the Multitude can immediately rule itself and act in concert without the need of law or the State – a society where antagonism has disappeared.

If our approach has been called 'post-Marxist', it is precisely because we have challenged the type of ontology subjacent to such a conception. As I and Ernesto Laclau have shown in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, to envisage negation on the mode of antagonism demands a different ontological approach.[4] It is not possible to make room for radical negativity without abandoning the immanentist idea of a homogeneous, saturated social space and acknowledging the role of heterogeneity. Indeed, as pointed out by Laclau, the two poles of antagonism do not belong to the same space of representation and they are essentially heterogeneous with respect to each other. It is out of this irreducible heterogeneity that they emerge.[5]

This is why politics always takes place in a field crisscrossed by antagonisms. To envisage it as 'acting in concert' leads to erasing the ontological dimension of antagonism that I call 'the political', which provides its quasi-transcendental condition of possibility. There will always be a struggle between conflicting hegemonic projects aiming at presenting their views of the common good as the 'true' incarnation of the universal. No rational resolution of that conflict will ever be available. As far as political critique is concerned, it can never be merely oppositional or conceived as desertion because it always engages with a certain aspect of the existing hegemony in order to disarticulate/re-articulate its constitutive elements.

I would like to emphasize that the aim of a counter-hegemonic intervention is not to unveil 'true reality' or 'real interests', but to re-articulate a given situation in a new configuration. Envisaging the critical process in these terms shows that, contrary to what Bruno Latour has affirmed, critique has not run out of steam. Although conceding that critique might have done a good job in debunking prejudices and illusions, Latour claims that critique has finally revealed its limits because of its reliance on a sharp distinction between nature and culture and its assumption that there is a 'true' world behind the veil of appearances. Nowadays, belief in the existence of such a world has been discredited, and it is time, he says, to find an alternative. He describes his project in the form of a question: 'Is it really possible to transform the critical urge in the ethos of someone who *adds* reality to matters of fact and not *substract* reality?'[6] It is such an alternative that Latour puts forward under the name of 'compositionism'. To overcome the bifurcation between nature, objectivity and reality on one side, and culture, subjectivity and appearances on the other, the solution he proposes is to 'compose' the common world. Contrasting it with critique and its belief in a world beyond this world, he declares that 'for compositionism, there is no world of beyond. It is all about *immanence*.'[7] This means that, according to the compositionists, one should discard the opposition between what is constructed and what is not constructed. Instead, the question to ask is whether something is well constructed or badly constructed.

I agree with Latour that it is important to challenge the traditional modernist epistemology that postulates a radical divide between human subjects and non-human objects. Our discursive approach dovetails with his constructivism on several points. There are, of course, many differences stemming from the fact that our fields of enquiry are not of the same nature, but we could say that we broadly belong to the same epistemological camp that rejects the separation between culture and nature and the thesis of the existence of a world of facts independent of what he calls 'matter of concerns'.

However, when it comes to envisaging the question of the political, there are significant divergences. The best way to apprehend their nature is probably by pointing out that, instead of saying, like Latour, that the common world has to be 'composed', Laclau and I assert that it has to be 'articulated'. This terminological difference is meant to highlight the fact that the process of composition always takes place in a terrain informed by power relations – or to put it in our vocabulary, that the common world is always the result of an 'hegemonic' construction. As a consequence, it is not enough for us to ask if this world is badly or well constructed. It is also necessary to examine the power relations that are at play in composition. Latour writes that 'what is to be composed, may, at any point, be *de*composed.'[8] Indeed. This is what we refer to as the process of disarticulation/re-articulation that is constitutive of the counter-hegemonic struggle. But this process is eminently political and it does not take place in a neutral terrain in which the observers could impartially decide if things have been composed in a 'good' or a 'bad' way. Conflicting interests are at stake in the hegemonic articulation of the common, and this is why an element of critique is always involved in any attempt at disarticulation (*de*composition). Latour's move to eliminate the critical dimension because it is grounded in a deficient epistemology and his attempt to redirect the critical urge towards compositionism have, in my view, disempowering political effects because they preclude the possibility of revealing and challenging power relations.

I would like to suggest that when it comes to politics, the divergence between our discursive hegemonic approach and Latour's compositionism has its origin in our different ontologies. This has to do with the inability of the immanentist approach to acknowledge radical negativity and the ineradicability of antagonism. As with the exodus theorists, although in the context of very different political strategies, the problem with Latour's compositionism is that it relies on an ontology that is unable to give account of the division of the social. In the case of Hardt and Negri, this leads them to believe in the availability of an 'absolute democracy' to be reached once the Multitude has overcome Empire. Latour is very far from this kind of messianism and his politics does not pretend to be radical, but his compositionism is similarly unable to acknowledge the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order.

In both cases, what also is foreclosed is the possibility of visualizing a 'war of position' aiming at a profound transformation of existing power relations. Hardt and Negri's failure to grasp the hegemonic nature of socio-economic orders precludes their envisaging the possibility of transforming them through an internal process of re-articulation. For his part, Latour rightly wants to

convert matters of fact into matters of concern, and he praises debate and contestation. But his political posture is close to the 'agonism without antagonism' whose shortcomings I discussed in the first chapter; what is lacking here again is the antagonistic dimension of the political.

COMMUNISM OR RADICAL DEMOCRACY?

Given my insistence on the importance of acknowledging radical negativity and of relinquishing the idea of a society beyond division and power, it will not come as a surprise that I disagree with the attempt by a group of left intellectuals to revive the 'Idea of communism'.[9] They claim that the 'communist hypothesis' is absolutely necessary for envisaging a politics of emancipation. They argue that the egalitarian ideal is so intrinsically linked to the horizon of communism that its future depends on bringing back such a model.

They are no doubt right in refusing the widely accepted view that the disastrous failure of the Soviet model forces us to reject the entirety of the emancipatory project. But I do believe that there are important lessons to be learned from the tragic experience of 'really existing socialism', and this calls for a serious rethinking of some central tenets of the communist project.

It would indeed be too easy to simply declare that the Soviet model represents a flawed realization of an ideal that remains to be truly implemented. To be sure, many of the reasons for which the communist ideal went astray could be avoided and the current conditions might provide a more favourable terrain. But some of the problems that it encountered cannot be reduced to a simple question of application. They have to do with the way this ideal was conceptualized. To remain faithful to the ideals that inspired the different communist movements, it is necessary to scrutinize how they conceived their goal so as to understand why those ideals could have become so disastrously misled.

It is the very notion of 'communism' that needs to be problematized because it strongly connotes the anti-political vision of a society where antagonisms have been eradicated and where law, the state and other regulatory institutions have become irrelevant. The main shortcoming of the Marxist approach lies in its inability to acknowledge the crucial role of what I call 'the political'. While traditional Marxism asserted that communism and the withering away of the state logically entailed each other, Laclau and I assert that the emancipatory project can no longer be conceived of as the elimination of power and the management of common affairs by social agents identified with the viewpoint

of the social totality. There will always be antagonism, struggles and division of the social, and the need for institutions to deal with them will never disappear.

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

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

1 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York: Penguin Press, 2004; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonweath*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

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

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

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

5 See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London and New York: Verso, 2005, chapter 5.

6 Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Enquiry* 30:2, 2004, 232.

7 Bruno Latour, 'An attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto" ', *New Literary History* 41:3, 2010, 475.

8 Ibid., 474.

9 Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, *The Idea of Communism*, London and New York: Verso, 2010.

Chapter 5

Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices

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

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

Adorno, however, still believed in the possibility for art to provide a space for autonomy. It is precisely this possibility that some claim has disappeared, declaring that nowadays Adorno and Horkheimer's worst nightmares have come true. Art has been subsumed by the aesthetics of biopolitical capitalism and autonomous production is no longer possible. The production of symbols has become a central goal of capitalism, and through the development of the creative industries individuals are now totally subjugated to the control of capital. Not only consumers but cultural producers too are prisoners of the culture industry dominated by the media and entertainment corporations. We have all been transformed into passive functions of the capitalist system.

Fortunately, this pessimistic diagnosis is not shared by everybody. For instance, some post-operaist theorists maintain that the analysis of Adorno and Horkheimer, based as it is on the fordist model, does not provide a useful guide for examining the new forms of production that have become dominant in the

post-fordist mode of capitalist regulation. They see those new forms of production as allowing for new types of resistance, and they envisage the possibility of a revitalization of the emancipatory project, to which artistic practices could make a decisive contribution.

Paolo Virno, for instance, paints a different picture to that of Horkheimer and Adorno. In *A Grammar of the Multitude*, he asserts that the culture industries have played an important role in the transition from fordism to post-fordism.[1] In his view, they represent the 'matrix of post-fordism'. With the development of immaterial labour in advanced capitalism, the labour process has become performative, and it mobilizes the most universal requisites of the species: perception, language, memory and feelings. Contemporary production is now 'virtuosic', and productive labour in its totality appropriates the special characteristics of the performing artist. We are witnessing a process of hybridization between spheres of labour, political action and intellectual reflection, which were previously distinct because they were supported by radically heterogeneous principles and criteria. Today the boundaries between pure intellectual activity, political action and labour have dissolved, and post-fordist labour has absorbed into itself many of the characteristics of political action.

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

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

> When self-exploitation acquires a central role in the process of valorization, the production of subjectivity becomes a terrain of the central conflict … social relations that elude the grasp of value, competitive individualism and market exchange make the latter appear by contrast in their political dimension, as extensions of the power of capital. A front of total resistance to this power is made possible which necessarily overflows the terrain of production of knowledge towards new practices of living, consuming and collective appropriation of common spaces and everyday culture.[2]

I also believe that the terrain of the production of subjectivity is of strategic importance. I agree with Brian Holmes that 'Art can offer a chance for society to collectively reflect on the imaginary figures it depends upon for its very consistency, its self-understanding.'[3] I am convinced that artistic and cultural practices can offer spaces for resistance that undermine the social imaginary necessary for capitalist reproduction. But I think that to apprehend their political potential, we should visualize forms of artistic resistance as agonistic interventions within the context of counter-hegemonic struggles.

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

At first sight, this analysis would seem to support the pessimistic view about the end of a critical role for art. But by allowing me to see the transition from fordism to post-fordism in hegemonic terms, Boltanski and Chiapello have in fact provided the framework for the argument that I want to make in this chapter about the importance of artistic and cultural practices in the counter-hegemonic struggle. Indeed, when the current neo-liberal hegemony is seen in terms of a 'passive revolution', as the result of a set of political interventions in a complex field of economic, legal and ideological forces, its discursive nature comes to the fore.

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

The importance of the hegemonic approach to artistic practices and their relation to politics is that it highlights the fact that the hegemonic confrontation is not limited to traditional political institutions. It also takes place in the multiplicity of places where hegemony is constructed, bringing to light the political centrality of what is usually called 'civil society'. This is where, as Antonio Gramsci has argued, a particular conception of the world is established and a specific understanding of reality is defined – what he refers to as 'common sense', which provides the terrain in which specific forms of subjectivity are constructed. And he repeatedly emphasized the centrality of cultural and artistic practices in the formation and diffusion of common sense, underlining the decisive role played by those practices in the reproduction or disarticulation of a given hegemony. If it is the result of a discursive articulation, common sense can be transformed through counter-hegemonic interventions, and this is where cultural and artistic practices can play a decisive role.

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

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

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

AGONISTIC PUBLIC SPACES

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

Before addressing this question, I want to clarify that I do not see the relation between art and politics in terms of two separately constituted fields, art on one side and politics on the other, between which a relation need be established. There is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art. From the point of view of the theory of hegemony, artistic practices play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order, or in its challenging, and this is why they necessarily have a political dimension. The political, for its part, concerns the symbolic ordering of social relations, and this is where its aesthetic dimension resides. This is why I believe that it is not useful to make a distinction between political and non-political art.

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

And what distinguishes the agonistic approach to the public space from other approaches? Its main characteristic is that it challenges the widespread view that, albeit in different ways, informs most visions of the public space. According to the accepted view, the public space is the terrain where one aims at creating consensus. For the agonistic approach, on the contrary, the public space is where conflicting points of view are confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation. Such a conception is clearly very different from the one defended by Jürgen Habermas, who presents what he calls the 'public sphere' as the place where deliberation aiming at a rational consensus takes

place.

To be sure, Habermas now accepts that it is improbable, given the limitations of social life, that such a consensus could effectively be reached, and he sees his 'ideal situation of communication' as a 'regulative idea'. However, from the perspective of the hegemonic approach, the impediments to the Habermasian ideal speech situation are not merely linked to empirical limitations. They are of an ontological nature. As I indicated in the first chapter, one of the main tenets of agonistics is that the kind of rational consensus which Habermas's approach postulates is a conceptual impossibility because it presupposes the availability of a consensus without exclusion, which is precisely what the hegemonic approach reveals to be impossible.

The way public spaces are envisaged has important consequences for artistic and cultural practices because those who foster the creation of agonistic public spaces will conceive critical art in a very different way than those whose aim is the creation of consensus. The agonistic approach sees critical art as constituted by a manifold of artistic practices bringing to the fore the existence of alternatives to the current post-political order. Its critical dimension consists in making visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate, in giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony. There is, however, a point that needs to be clarified to avoid any misunderstanding about the way the agonistic approach understands critique. Critical artistic practices, according to this view, do not aspire to lift a supposedly false consciousness so as to reveal the 'true reality'. This would be completely at odds with the anti-essentialist premises of the theory of hegemony, which rejects the very idea of a 'true consciousness'. As I indicated earlier, it is always through insertion in a manifold of practices, discourses and language games that specific forms of individualities are constructed. This is why the transformation of political identities can never result from a rationalist appeal to the true interest of the subject, but rather from the inscription of the social agent in a set of practices that will mobilize its affects in a way that disarticulates the framework in which the dominant process of identification takes place. As Yannis Stavrakakis points out, 'a critique of an ideological system of meaning cannot be effective if it remains at a purely deconstructive level; it requires a mapping of the fantasies supporting this system and an encircling of its symptomatic function'.[5] This means that to construct oppositional identities, it is not enough to simply foster a process of 'de-identification'. A second move is necessary. To insist only on the first move is in fact to remain trapped in a problematic according to which the negative moment would be sufficient on its own to bring about something positive, as if new subjectivities were previously available, ready to emerge when the weight

of the dominant ideology has been lifted. Such a view, which informs many forms of critical art, fails to come to terms with the nature of the hegemonic struggle and the complex process of the construction of identities.

ALFREDO JAAR'S COUNTER-HEGEMONIC INTERVENTIONS

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

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

Alfredo Jaar's artistic interventions chime with the hegemonic approach in several ways. They have generally been described as providing 'counter-information' (Georges Didi-Huberman) or building a 'counter-environment' (Adriana Valdes). In both cases, Jaar emphasizes what I have previously referred to as a strategy of 'disarticulating' the existing 'common sense' and fostering a variety of agonistic public spaces that contribute to the development of a 'counter-hegemony'.

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

What is particularly interesting in this form of intervention is its mode of unsettling common sense by posing apparently simple questions, albeit questions that, in the specific context of the intervention, are likely to trigger

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

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

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

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

As Dewey pointed out, works of art allow us, through imagination and the

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

ARTISTIC ACTIVISM

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

We can find another example in the strategy of 'identity correction' employed by the Yes Men. Appearing under different identities – for instance, as representatives of the World Trade Organization – they have developed a very effective satire of neo-liberal ideology.[8] Their aim is to target institutions that foster neo-liberalism at the expense of people's well-being, and they do this by assuming the identities of these institutions in order to offer correctives. For instance, the following text appeared in 1999 on a parody website designed to look like the real WTO website:

> The World Trade Organization is a giant international bureaucracy whose goal is to help businesses by enforcing 'free trade', the freedom of transnationals to do business however they see fit. The WTO places this freedom above all other freedoms, including the freedom to eat, drink water, not eat certain things, treat the sick, protect the environment, grow your own crops, organize a trade union, maintain social services, govern, have a foreign policy. All those freedoms are under attack by huge corporations working under the veil of 'free trade', that mysterious right that we are told must trump all others.[9]

Some people mistook this false website for the real one, and the Yes Men even managed to appear as WTO representatives at several international

conferences. In one case, their satirical intervention consisted of proposing a telematic worker-surveillance device in the shape of a yard-long golden phallus.

We can better grasp the political character of these varieties of artistic activism if we see them as counter-hegemonic interventions whose objective is to disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism tries to spread, thereby bringing to the fore its repressive character. By putting artistic forms at the service of political activism, these 'artivist' practices represent an important dimension of radical politics. They can be seen as counter-hegemonic moves against the capitalist appropriation of aesthetics and its goal of securing and expanding the valorization process.

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

MUSEUMS AND INSTITUTIONS

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

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

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

In the case of museums, my view is that, far from being condemned to playing the role of conservative institutions dedicated to the maintenance and reproduction of the existing hegemony, museums and art institutions can contribute to subverting the ideological framework of consumer society. Indeed, they could be transformed into agonistic public spaces where this hegemony is openly contested. Since its beginning, the history of the museum has been linked to the construction of bourgeois hegemony, but this function can be altered. As Wittgenstein has taught us, signification is always dependent on context, and it is use which determines meaning.

This is equally true for institutions, and we should discard the essentialist idea that some institutions are by essence destined to fulfil one immutable function. In fact, we have already witnessed how, following the neo-liberal trend, many museums have abandoned their original function of educating citizens about the dominant culture and have been reduced to sites of entertainment for a public of consumers. The main objective of these 'post-modern' museums is to make money through blockbuster exhibitions and the sale of a manifold of products for tourists. The type of 'participation' they promote is based on consumerism, and they actively contribute to the commercialization and depoliticization of the cultural field.

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

context that allows them to be distinguished from commercial products.[11] Envisaged in such a way, the museum would offer spaces for resisting the effects of the growing commercialization of art.

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

Between 2000 and 2008, MACBA launched various projects informed by critical pedagogy in order to recover the museum's role as an educational institution and as a constituent part of the public sphere. With the aim of proposing an alternative reading of modern art, the MACBA started to develop a collection and organize temporary exhibitions privileging artists and art scenes that had been neglected by the dominant discourse on artistic modernity. Another objective of the MACBA was to establish a vibrant relationship between the museum and the city, and to provide a space for debate and conflict. Looking for ways in which art could make a significant contribution to a multiplication of public spaces, the museum encouraged contact between different social movements.

For example, the series of workshops organized in 2002 called *Direct Action as one of the Fine Arts* brought together artist collectives and social movements to examine possible forms of connecting local political struggles with artistic practices. Several workshops were organized around topics such as precarious labour, borders and migrations, gentrification, new media and emancipatory policies. A further example of collaboration with new social movements was *How do we want to be governed?*, a project conceived as a counter-model to the 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures launched by the City Council of Barcelona. While using culture as an alibi, the real objective of this forum was to promote the 'urban renewal' of the city's seafront, which was going to be very lucrative for real-estate developers. Curated by Roger Buergel, *How do you want to be governed?* took place in several areas of the site to be remodeled. It was an exhibition in process, combining artistic work and social dynamics and involving debates with neighbourhood movements.

The experience of MACBA represents a radical alternative to the modern and the post-modern museum, but many other types of initiatives are worth mentioning. At the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, the director Zdenka

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

ARTISTS AS ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS

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

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

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

Today, artists can no longer pretend to constitute an avantgarde offering a

radical critique. But this is not a reason to proclaim that their political role has ended; they have an important role to play in the hegemonic struggle. By constructing new practices and new subjectivities, they can help subvert the existing configuration of power. In fact, this has always been the role of artists, and it is only the modernist illusion of the privileged position of the artist that has made us believe otherwise. Once this illusion is abandoned – along with the revolutionary conception of politics that accompanies it – we can properly envisage the critical role that artistic and cultural practices can play nowadays.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 6

Conclusion

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

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

To be sure, in several cases we find similar features – for instance, the use of social networks like Facebook or micro-blogging sites such as Twitter – but their role has often been greatly exaggerated. To speak, in the case of Tunisia and Egypt for instance, of a 'Google revolution' is clearly risible. In the case of the Middle East, it seems that a crucial role was played by television, which, unlike the Internet, was accessible to many popular sectors, either at home or in local cafés.

A more significant commonality concerns the spatial occupation of public places. There is no denying the influence that the model of Midan Al-Tahrir in Cairo had on the occupation of Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Syntagma Square in Athens and the various Occupy camps. But the reasons that brought people to these locations were very different. In the Middle East, the demonstrations were directed against dictatorial regimes, while in Europe and the US they were mainly expressions of resistance against the shortcomings of the democratic system and its subservience to the forces of finance. These movements are products of very specific circumstances and their aims are different. To

proclaim that they announce a new type of 'molecular' politics that is bound to displace the 'archaic' representative forms of politics is highly problematic. Moreover, it leads to neglecting the specificity of their various contexts and their particular characteristics.

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

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

A NEW TYPE OF ACTIVISM?

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

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

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

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

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

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

When these later developments are taken into account, the complex nature of the protests is brought to the fore. This is why their critique of the current

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

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

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

Lorey claims that the diverse occupation movements represent radical changes in politics, society and economics, and they signal the emergence of 'constituent power beyond representation'. Following the analyses of Antonio Negri, she sees this constituent power as a process that cannot be represented nor embodied in a judicial institutionalized power. She insists that it must

reject mediation through representation and should not be tamed into a 'people'. Presentist democracy is, therefore, the opposite of representative democracy; it is a matter of collective political practices without any claim to government.

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

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

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

The interviews realized for the project about 'subterranean' politics cast doubt on the claim that the anti-representative position is typical of the

majority of the activists. There is no denying that such views are found among the activists involved in these movements, and I am willing to grant the 'presentist' character of some of the practices developed in the camps and the assemblies. But to present the aim of all the outraged as being the establishment of a democracy beyond representation is to read these protests in a very unilateral way. But more importantly, in my view, even if those views were dominant, this would not be enough to conclude that such a strategy is adequate and that practices informed by horizontality and presentism should provide the backbone of the progressive struggle. The question we should ask concerns the efficacy of such practices and their potential for bringing about a different type of society where the inequalities they denounce have been abolished.

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

In voicing the outrage against the obscene inequalities existing in the midst of Western societies, those movements have raised important issues, and this can hopefully motivate people to call for an alternative. But this is only the beginning, and to effectively transform power relations, the new consciousness that arises out of those protests requires institutional channels. As I have argued in this book, in order to challenge neo-liberalism, it is necessary to engage with its key institutions. It is not enough to organize new forms of existence of the common, outside the dominant capitalist structures, as if the latter would progressively ebb away without any confrontation.

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

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

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

It is certainly positive that Occupy, in contrast to the *Indignados*, has a clearly defined adversary: Wall Street, the London Stock Exchange, and other financial institutions. Yet, I find their slogan 'We are the 99%' rather unsatisfactory. It might be rousing, but it reveals a lack of awareness about the wide range of antagonisms existing in society and a rather naïve belief in the possibility of installing a consensual society, once the 'bad' 1% have been eliminated. This kind of reasoning could easily lead to a moralistic condemnation of the rich, instead of a political analysis of the complex configuration of power forces that need to be challenged to create a more just and democratic society. In addition to being too inclusive, this slogan also seems to take for granted the pre-given unit of the 'we'. It obviates the necessary process of constructing this 'we' through the articulation of a chain of equivalences among the manifold protests. This moment of constructing a collective will across differences is, I contend, the crucial political step without which no adequate strategy can be designed.

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

We can find another point of convergence between those movements and the

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

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

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

AN AGONISTIC APPROACH

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

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

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

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

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

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

Socialist Party and several other groups with a more radical agenda. The ability, for instance, of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the candidate of the Front de Gauche – a coalition of several left parties – to mobilize the youth in the 2012 presidential elections was remarkable. Many young people, who in other countries would have been found in Occupy camps or would have remained sceptical about political involvement, felt that there was a place for their demands in the programme of the Front de Gauche. They participated with great enthusiasm in Mélanchon's campaign for a 'citizen revolution'.

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

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

A similar episode happened in Greece in December 2008, when groups of young people engaged in several days of rioting. The riots began in Athens, in the alternative district of Exarchia. They too were a response to police violence and quickly spread to a number of other cities. In the Greek case also, there were no political demands, only violence.

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

France and Syriza in Greece are already trying to do, and it is to be hoped that events like those of 2005 and 2008 will not occur again in those countries.

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

This is no doubt what explains the success of Marine Le Pen in France and the fact that many French workers now vote for the Front National. Hopefully this will change because Jean-Luc Mélanchon has understood the problem and the Front de Gauche has undertaken the reconquest of the popular vote.

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

DEMOCRACY OR REPRESENTATION?

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

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

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

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

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

The recent 'citizen awakening' in Europe and in the US is very encouraging because it breaks with the post-political consensus. A taboo has been broken and many voices are now being heard, contesting the inequalities existing in our societies. To effectively challenge neo-liberal hegemony, it is crucial, however, that all the energies that have erupted are not diverted towards the wrong channels. I am afraid that this is what could happen if representative institutions become the main target of the protests. There is no denying that representative institutions are in crisis in their current liberal democratic form, but I do not believe that the solution resides in the establishment of a 'non-representative' democracy, or that extra-parliamentary struggles are the only vehicle for making democratic advances.

Such views are popular because they chime with the idea, fashionable among sectors of the left, that the Multitude could auto-organize itself, avoiding taking power and becoming the state. To find such an anti-political approach among activists involved in the various movements of the outraged is worrying because it forecloses the possibility of designing an adequate strategy for their struggle. When representation is seen as the problem, the aim cannot be to engage with current institutions to make them more representative and more

accountable; the aim is to discard them entirely. The objective of the movements can be visualized as an 'exodus' from given forms of democracy, on the ground that attempting to transform existing institutions is futile and that representative democracy has to be relinquished.

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

What needs to be challenged is the lack of alternatives offered to citizens, not the very idea of representation. A pluralist democratic society cannot exist without representation. To begin with, as the anti-essentialist approach has made clear, identities are never already given, but always produced through discursive construction; this process of construction *is* a process of representation. It is through representation that collective political subjects are created, and they do not exist beforehand. Every assertion of a political identity is thereby interior, not exterior, to the process of representation.

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

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

agonistic politics.

What I contend, however, is that these practices cannot provide a *substitute* for representative institutions and that it is necessary to establish a synergy between different forms of intervention. Instead of opposing extra-parliamenary to parliamentary struggle, thereby eschewing the possibility of common action, the objective should be to jointly launch a counter-hegemonic offensive against neo-liberalism. If the protest movements refuse to establish alliances with traditional channels that they deemed as intrinsically impervious to democratic transformation, their radical potential will be drastically weakened.

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

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

1 Isabell Lorey, 'On Democracy and Occupation: Horizontality and the Need for New Forms of Verticality' in *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, ed. Pascal Gielen, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2013, 53.

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

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

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

5 Mark Fisher, 'Indirect Action: Some misgivings about horizontalism', *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, ed. Pascal Gielen, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2013, 59.

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

Interview with Chantal Mouffe[1]

I: Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, *the book that you wrote with Ernesto Laclau, has been translated into many languages and has had an enormous influence on theories of the New Social Movements.*[2] *In* Hegemony, you *attempt to reformulate Marxist theory in order to intervene in contemporary discussions about the nature of the political. Could you elaborate a little on the genesis of this book and its basic ideas? In particular, what role does the notion of hegemony play in it?*

Mouffe: We had two main objectives when we wrote *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which was published by Verso in 1985. One was a political objective, another was a theoretical one. The political objective was to reformulate the socialist project so as to provide an answer to the crisis of left-wing thought both in its communist and in its social democratic versions. This crisis was, in our view, due in part to the growing importance of the new social movements which had been emerging since the '60s and whose specificity neither Marxism nor social democracy was able to grasp. Hence our theoretical aim, which was to develop an approach that would illuminate the specificity of movements which were not class-based and could therefore not be apprehended merely in terms of economic exploitation. We were convinced that this required the elaboration of the theory of the political. We attempted to provide such a theory by bringing together two different theoretical approaches: the critique of essentialism found in poststructuralism, as represented by Derrida, Lacan, Foucault (but also by American pragmatism and Wittgenstein); and several important insights from Gramsci's conception of hegemony. This theoretical approach, which has sometimes been referred to as post-Marxist, has also become known as 'discourse theory'.

I: What are the main concepts of your approach?

Mouffe: The two main categories in our approach are, first, the concept of 'antagonism', and second, that of 'hegemony'. The concept of antagonism is absolutely central in our thought because it asserts that negativity is constitutive and can never be overcome. The idea of antagonism also reveals the existence of conflicts for which there are no rational solution. This points to an understanding of pluralism that is very different from the liberal one. It's a pluralism which, like that of Nietzsche or Max Weber, implies the impossibility of the final reconciliation of all views. Later, in *The Democratic Paradox*, I proposed calling this ineradicable dimension of antagonism 'the political' in order to distinguish it from 'politics', which refers to the manifold

practices aiming at organizing human coexistence.[3] The second important concept is 'hegemony'. Antagonism and hegemony are for Laclau and I the two central concepts needed to elaborate a theory of the political. They are related in the following way. To think of the political and the ever present possibility of antagonism requires coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and acknowledging the dimension of undecidability and contingency which pervades every order. In our vocabulary, this also signifies asserting the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order. To speak of hegemony means that every social order is a contingent articulation of power relations that lacks an ultimate rational ground. Society is always the product of a series of practices that attempt to create a certain order in a contingent context. These are the practices that we call 'hegemonic practices'. Things could always be otherwise. Every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. A particular order is always the expression of a particular configuration of power relations. It is in this sense that every order is political. A given order could not exist without the power relations that give it shape. This theoretical point has crucial implications for practical politics. It is often said today that neo-liberal globalization is a fate which has to be accepted. Remember how many times Margaret Thatcher declared, 'There is no alternative'? Unfortunately many social democrats have accepted this view and believe that the only thing they can do is to manage this supposedly natural order of globalization in a more humane way. However, according to our approach, it is clear that every order is a political one, resulting from a given hegemonic configuration of power relations. The present state of globalization, far from being 'natural', is the result of a neo-liberal hegemony, and it is structured through specific relations of power. This means that it can be challenged and transformed, and that alternatives are indeed available. As you can see, this concept of an hegemonic configuration is crucial for envisaging how to act in politics. It reveals that you can always change things politically, that you can always intervene in the relations of power in order to transform them.

I: What are the consequences of this approach for envisaging alternatives to hegemonic power relations nowadays?

Mouffe: What is important is first to question the very idea that there is a natural order which is the consequence of the development of objective forces, be it the forces of production, the laws of history or the development of the spirit. To use the slogan of the alter-globalization movement, we can assert that 'Another world is possible!' Indeed, according to our approach, other worlds are always possible and we should never accept that things cannot be changed. There are always alternatives that have been excluded by the dominant hegemony and that can be actualized. This is precisely what a theory

of hegemony helps to understand. Every hegemonic order can be challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, which attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to establish another form of hegemony. As you clearly realize, such a thesis has very important implications for the way we envisage the aims of an emancipatory politics. If political struggle is always a confrontation between different hegemonic practices and different hegemonic projects, this implies that there is no point where one could claim that such a confrontation should stop because a perfect democracy has been reached. This is why in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* we reformulate the project of the left in terms of 'radical and plural democracy', and why we insist that this has to be envisaged as an unending process. What we advocate is a radicalization of existing democratic institutions so as to make the principles of liberty and equality become effective in an increasing number of social relations. Our aim, as I indicated earlier, was to take account of the demands of the new social movements. For us, the challenge for the left was to find a way to articulate the new demands put forward by feminists, anti-racists, the gay movement, and the environmental movement in a way that connected them to demands formulated in terms of class. In that respect, another important concept in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was 'chain of equivalences'. Against the kind of total separation advocated by some post-modern theorists, we argued that it was necessary for the left to establish a chain of equivalences among all these different struggles so that, when the workers define their demands, they also take account of the demands of the Blacks, the immigrants, the feminists. This requires, of course, that when feminists define their demands, they do not do so around purely gender issues, but instead take account of the demands of the other groups so as to create a wide chain of equivalences among democratic struggles. The objective of the left, we claimed, should be to create a collective will of all the democratic forces in order to push for the radicalization of democracy and to establish a new hegemony.

I should also stress another important dimension of this project of radical democracy. The idea is to break with the belief that, in advanced Western democratic societies, in order to move towards a more just society it is necessary to destroy the liberal democratic order and build a new order from scratch. Here we were criticizing the traditional Leninist revolutionary model and asserting that, in a modern pluralist democracy, deep democratic advances could be carried out through an immanent critique of existing institutions. The problem with modern democratic societies, in our view, is not their ethico-political principles of liberty and equality but the fact that these principles are not put into practice. So the strategy of the left in these societies should be to act for the enforcement of these principles, and this does not require a radical

break. Rather, it requires what Gramsci calls ‘a war of position’ leading to the creation of a new hegemony.

I: How can this chain of equivalences be put into practice today? What role do the unions or the established political parties play?

Mouffe: Unfortunately, the situation today, as far as the possibility of radicalizing democracy, is much less favourable than thirty years ago when we wrote our book. The need for a chain of equivalences remains the crucial task for a left-wing project, but the terrain has been profoundly transformed by neo-liberalism. At the beginning of the ’80s, the social-democratic common sense was still widespread. We were critical of the shortcomings of the social democratic parties and we advocated a radicalization of democratic politics, but nobody imagined that the advances made by social democracy were so fragile. Since then, things have changed drastically. Through the politics of Reagan and Thatcher, neo-liberalism began its successful march and has since made great inroads worldwide. In Britain, Thatcherism managed to displace the hegemony of social democracy and install a neo-liberal one, which is still in place today. We currently find ourselves in a situation where we are obliged to defend basic institutions of the welfare state that we earlier criticized for not being democratic enough. Recently, even civil rights that constitute the backbone of a democratic order have come under attack as a result of the so-called ‘war against terrorism’. Instead of struggling for a radicalization of democracy, we are forced to struggle against a further destruction of fundamental democratic institutions. What can be done? From my perspective, a front of all the progressive forces needs to be established. It is necessary for all the movements of civil society, organized for instance around Attac or the World Social Forum, to work together with the progressive political parties and with the trade unions. A vast chain of equivalences is needed in order to establish the institutional mediations necessary to challenge the hegemonic order. What worries me is the resistance of many social movements to working with established political institutions. I have been involved with the alter-globalization movement, and important sectors within this movement have an extremely negative attitude towards established organizations. They are influenced by the ideas of Hardt and Negri, who in their books *Empire* and *Multitude* argue that civil society movements should avoid engaging with political institutions. They see all these ‘molar’ (a term from Deleuze and Guattari) institutions as ‘machines of capture’ and claim that the fundamental struggle takes place at the ‘molecular’ level of micropolitics. According to the perspective of Hardt and Negri, the very contradictions of Empire will bring about its collapse and lead to the victory of the Multitude. In fact, they reproduce, even if in a different vocabulary, the deterministic Marxism of the

Second International, according to which the contradiction of the forces of production were by themselves going to bring about the collapse of capitalism and the victory of socialism. Nothing needs to be done, just wait for the end of capitalism. The perspective of Empire is similar – of course, adapted to the new conditions. It is now immaterial labour which plays the central role, and it is no longer the proletariat but the Multitude which is the revolutionary agent. But it is the same old deterministic approach. This is why they refuse the idea that it is necessary to establish any form of political unity among the different movements. What I take to be the crucial political question is never posed by them: how is the multitude going to become a political subject? They recognize that the movements have different objectives, but for them, the issue of how to articulate these differences does not constitute a problem. Indeed, in their view, it is precisely because those struggles don't converge that they are more radical, each struggle being directed straight to the virtual centre of Empire. I think that such an approach has had a negative influence on several sectors of the alter-globalization movement, because it has led activists to avoid addressing the fundamental political issue: how to organize across differences so as to create a chain of equivalences among the different struggles.

I: Besides your critique of the approach of Negri and Hardt, in your recent work you have attempted to sharpen your own position through a critical investigation of some prominent theories of the political that are advanced by diverse sociologists and political thinkers. Could you explain the meaning of this?

Mouffe: After writing *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and having pointed out the shortcomings of Marxism in the field of the political, I wanted to show that the solution could not be found in liberalism because it does not have a theory of the political either. This is why I began to discuss different liberal models, particularly the one which was most important at that time: the model of John Rawls. In my view, there were two reasons why liberal theory could not really apprehend the nature of the political: first, because of its rationalism; and second, because of its individualism. Rationalism and the belief in the availability of a final reconciliation through reason impede one from acknowledging the ever present possibility of antagonism. And individualism does not allow one to grasp the mode of creation of political identities, which are always collective identities, constructed in the form of a we/they relation. Moreover, the rationalism and individualism dominant in liberal theory do not allow one to understand the crucial role played in politics by what I have called 'passions': the affective dimension which is mobilized in the creation of political identities. Take, for instance, the question of nationalism. It is clear that the importance of nationalism cannot be understood without grasping how collective identities are created through the mobilization of affects and

desires. And of course, this is why liberal thought has always had so much difficulty in coming to terms with nationalism's different manifestations. For liberals, everything which implies a collective dimension is seen as archaic, something irrational that should not exist anymore in modern societies. No wonder, given these theoretical premises, that liberals should remain blind to the dynamic of the political.

I: And is it in this context that you began to be interested in the work of Carl Schmitt?

Mouffe: Yes, indeed. I felt that the critique that Schmitt makes of liberalism was a really powerful one. I was also surprised to realize how the critique of liberalism put forward by Schmitt in the 1920s in his book *The Concept of the Political* was still pertinent for later developments of liberal thought. He argues that liberalism cannot grasp the political and that when it tries to speak about the political, it uses either a vocabulary borrowed from economics or from ethics. This fits perfectly with the two main models of democratic politics that are currently dominant in political theory: the aggregative model on one side, and the deliberative model on the other. The aggregative model envisages the political domain mainly in economic terms. It is in reaction to that model that Rawls and Habermas developed their alternative model of deliberative democracy. But the deliberative model uses the ethical or moral approach to think about politics and does not provide a theory of the political. I want to stress, however, that while agreeing with Schmitt's critique of the shortcomings of liberalism, my aim is very different from his. While Schmitt sees liberal pluralist democracy as an unviable regime because he is adamant that liberalism negates democracy and that democracy negates liberalism, a central aspect of my work has been to provide an understanding of pluralist democracy which reintroduces the political dimension. This is why Schmitt constitutes a real challenge for me and, as the title of one of my articles indicates, why I am thinking 'with Schmitt against Schmitt'. My answer to Schmitt is precisely the agonistic model of democracy where I make the distinction between antagonism and agonism. The way I proceed is the following: I start by acknowledging, with Schmitt, the antagonistic dimension of the political, i.e., the permanence of conflicts which cannot have a rational solution. The friend/enemy relation concerns a negation which cannot be overcome dialectically. However, this antagonistic conflict can take different forms. It can express itself in the form of what we can call antagonism proper – that is, in the Schmittian form of friend and enemy. Here Schmitt is, of course, right that such an antagonism cannot be accommodated within a political society because it will lead to the destruction of the political association. But it can also be expressed in a different way, which I have called

'agonism'. The difference is that in the case of agonism we are not faced with a friend/enemy relation but with one between adversaries who recognize the legitimacy of the demands of their opponent. While knowing that there is no rational solution to their conflict, adversaries nevertheless accept a set of rules according to which their conflict is going to be regulated. What exists between adversaries is, so to speak, a conflictual consensus – they agree about the ethico-political principles which organize their political association but disagree about the interpretation of these principles. By making this distinction between antagonism proper and agonism, I am able, while asserting the ineradicability of antagonism, to envisage how this should not automatically lead to the negation of a pluralist democratic order. In fact, I go even further; I assert not only that the agonistic struggle is compatible with democracy, but that such a struggle is precisely what constitutes the specificity of a pluralist democratic politics. And this is why I present the agonistic model of democracy as an alternative to the aggregative and the deliberative models. In my view, the advantage of such a model is that by recognizing the role of passions in the creation of collective identities, it provides a better understanding of the dynamics of democratic politics, one that acknowledges the need for offering different forms of collective identification around clearly defined alternatives.

I: How would you differentiate your work from the concept of the 'cosmopolitan second modernity' as it is formulated by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens?

Mouffe: It is clear that, according to my agonistic model, democratic politics needs to be partisan. This is why I am very critical of the views of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, who argue that the adversarial model of politics has become obsolete and that we need to think beyond left and right. For me, the adversarial model is constitutive of democratic politics. Of course, we should not envisage the left/right opposition as having some kind of essential content. These notions need to be redefined according to different historical periods and contexts. What is really at stake in the left/right distinction is the recognition of social division and the existence of antagonistic conflicts that cannot be overcome through rational dialogue. I would not deny, of course, that we have experienced in recent years an increasing blurring of the frontiers between left and right. But while Beck and Giddens see this as a sign of progress for democracy, I am convinced that this is an evolution that was not necessary and that can be reversed. In my view, it needs to be resisted because it can endanger democratic institutions. The consequence of the disappearance of a fundamental difference between the democratic parties of centre-left and centre-right is that people are losing interest in politics. Witness the worrying decline in voting. The reason is that most social democratic parties have moved

so far towards the centre that they are unable to offer alternatives to the existing hegemonic order. No wonder people are losing interest in politics. A vibrant democratic politics needs to offer people the possibility of making genuine choices. Democratic politics must be partisan. In order to get involved in politics, citizens have to feel that real alternatives are at stake. The current disaffection with democratic parties is very bad for democratic politics. In several countries, it has led to the rise of right-wing populist parties who present themselves as the only ones concerned with offering alternatives and giving voice to the people neglected by the establishment parties. Remember what happened in France in 2002 in the first round of the presidential elections. Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the Front National, came in second and eliminated the Socialist candidate Lionel Jospin. Honestly, I was shocked but not surprised. I had been joking with my students during the campaign that the difference between Chirac and Jospin was really like the difference between Coca-Cola and Pepsi. Indeed, Jospin had insisted that his programme was not a socialist one, and the consequence was that many people could not bring themselves to vote for him in the first round. On the other side, many disgruntled voters were motivated to vote for Le Pen, who, thanks to his successful demagogic rhetoric, had managed to mobilize them against what they saw as the uncaring elites. I am really worried by the celebration of the politics of 'consensus at the centre' that exists today. I feel very strongly that such a post-political zeitgeist is creating a favourable terrain for the rise of right-wing populism.

I: You have also called attention to the growing tendency to moralize the political by replacing the opposition between left and right with an opposition between good and evil. Could you explain this?

Mouffe: Before answering your question, I would like to indicate another consequence of the blurring of the left/right opposition. When democratic politics does not offer people the possibility of identifying with collective political identities, we witness a tendency for people to look for other sources of collective identification. This has manifested itself, for instance, in the growing importance of religious forms of identification, particularly among Muslim immigrants. Many sociological studies in France have shown that the decline of the Communist Party has been accompanied, among lower skilled workers especially, by an increasing role played by religious forms of affiliation. Religion seems now to be replacing parties in fulfilling the need to belong to a community, in providing a 'we' identity. In other contexts, the lack of collective identification around political identities provided by the left/right distinction can also be replaced by regionalist or nationalist forms of identification. In my view, such a phenomenon is not good for democracy

because those identities cannot provide the terrain for an agonistic debate. This is why I think that it is a serious mistake to believe that we have now reached a stage where individualism has become so widespread that people no longer feel the need for collective forms of identification. The we/they distinction is constitutive of social life, and democratic politics needs to provide the discourses, the practices and the institutions that allow this distinction to be constructed politically. This should be the role of a variety of conceptions of citizenship.

Coming now to your question about the moralization of politics. What I have been arguing is that, contrary to what many people would like us to believe, the weakening of the discourses constructing political identities in terms of left and right has not meant the disappearance of the need for a we/they distinction. Such a distinction is still very much alive; however, today it is increasingly established through a moral vocabulary. We could say that the distinction between left and right has been replaced by the one between right and wrong. This indicates that the adversarial model of politics is still with us, but the main difference is that now politics is played out in the moral register, using the vocabulary of good and evil to discriminate between 'we the good democrats' and 'they the evil ones'. This can be seen, for instance, in the reactions to the rise of right-wing populist parties, where moral condemnation has generally replaced a properly political type of struggle. Instead of trying to grasp the reasons for the success of right-wing parties, the 'good' democratic parties have often limited themselves to calling for a *'cordon sanitaire'* to be established in order to stop the return of what they see as 'the brown plague'. Another example of this moralization of politics is when President George W. Bush opposes the civilized 'us' to the barbarian 'others'. To construct a political antagonism in this way is what I call the 'moralization of politics'. This is something that we can see at work in many different areas nowadays: the inability to formulate the problems facing society in a political way and to envisage political solutions to these problems leads to framing an increasing number of issues in moral terms. This is, of course, not good for democracy because when the opponents are not defined in a political but in a moral way, they cannot be seen as adversaries, but only as enemies. With the evil ones, no agonistic debate is possible. They have to be eliminated.

I: What role does the media play in moralizing the political? Is the moralization of events not the typical way the media tells stories? And don't most political struggles nowadays take place in the media, or at least get communicated by them, which might transform the character of the political struggle itself?

Mouffe: Of course, the media play an important role because they constitute

one of the terrains where the construction of political subjectivity takes place. But I think it is a mistake to see them as the main culprit, accusing them of being at the origin of the left's inability to act politically. The media are basically the mirror of society. If an agonistic debate was available, they would reflect it. There is no doubt that many media outlets are controlled by neo-liberal forces, and this is a problem. However, they are far from being all-powerful. As demonstrated by the 'No' vote in France and the Netherlands on the referendum for a European constitution – countries where the dominant media campaigned in favour of the constitution – the media cannot impose its point of view against a wide popular mobilization. Another example is provided by the defeat of Berlusconi in Italy, despites his crucial control of the media. Instead of deploring the role of the media, the left should recognize it as a site where the hegemonic struggle should be fought. With the development of new media, many possibilities exist for people to intervene directly and to develop agonistic strategies. In that area, I am convinced that a lot can be learned from the experiences of what is called 'artistic activism'. For instance, in the US in the '80s many people associated with ACT UP engaged in campaigns around AIDS by using marketing and publicity strategies to further social critique. They were at the origin of visual projects whose aim was to organize campaigns to create awareness about the political problems linked to AIDS – such as racism and homophobia – and to denounce the power of the big pharmaceutical firms. Theirs was a strategy of the subversive re-appropriation of the dominant forms of communication. For instance, in New York the Gran Fury Collective used the aesthetics of publicity in order to transmit images and slogans with very critical content. One of their projects, the poster 'Kissing Doesn't Kill' (1989) was made to look like a Benetton advertisement and was shown on buses. It depicted three couples – one heterosexual, one lesbian and one gay, composed of people of different ethnicities – and included the message 'Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do'. Nowadays, you can find many more examples of a creative use of the media in the political struggles against neo-liberal hegemony. A particularly interesting one is provided by the Yes Men and their strategy of 'identity correction'. This consists in impersonating officials of international organizations or multinationals in order to bring to the fore the concealed dark side of their policies. To acknowledge the power of the media is also to become aware of the many possibilities of diverting this power. What the left needs is more imagination in their use of the media so as to transform it into a terrain of agonistic confrontation.

I: When you think about practical political movements nowadays, what inspires your work? Which kind of topics and movements are of interest to your notion of the

political?

Mouffe: The most urgent struggle for the left today is to envisage an alternative to neo-liberalism. Many activists and theorists worldwide are engaged in such a task, and in some places, like Latin America, great advances are being made in that direction. While acknowledging the global dimension of such a struggle and the need for close links and forms of solidarity, I am also convinced that the problems need to be posed and tackled differently according to different regional contexts. This is not to deny that some problems, like those concerning climate change and the environment, can only be tackled at a global level, but I think it is a mistake to insist only on the global dimension and to deny the existence of a plurality of forms of life. Here again I agree with Schmitt that the world is a pluri-verse, not a universe. I do not believe in the existence of one single form of democracy that would provide the only legitimate, universal answer. There are many ways in which the democratic idea can be implemented according to different contexts. For those of us who live in Europe, the starting point cannot be the same as for those who live in other parts of the world. It is not by pretending to offer global solutions, but by addressing the problems facing our societies that we can contribute to the general struggle for democracy. In Europe today, our priority should be to revive the left/right confrontation and to create the conditions for an agonistic democracy. I am convinced that this can only be done at the European level. This is why the European dimension should be at the core of left-wing politics. The different European left-wing groups should establish close contacts in order to work together for the creation of a strong political Europe that could provide an alternative to neo-liberal policies and offer a different societal model. Many of the problems facing us today derive from the fact that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, we have been living in a unipolar world. The United States, with its unchallenged hegemony, is trying to impose its model worldwide, accusing all those who oppose this model of being 'enemies of civilization'. As I have argued in *On the Political*, it is the lack of legitimate channels for resisting American hegemony that explains the increase in violent forms of reaction that we are currently witnessing.[4] Contrary to those who argue that the solution to our predicament resides in the establishment of a cosmopolitan democracy, which I see as an anti-political illusion, I am convinced that what is required is the development of a multipolar world. This is why it is crucial for Europe to become a political Europe, a regional pole that could really play a role next to other emerging regional poles, like China and India. There is a real demand in the world for Europe to act independently of the United States and to offer leadership in many areas. It is high time that the left ceases to see Europe as the Trojan horse of neo-liberalism and begins

working on the elaboration of a left-wing European project.

I: Thank you!

1 This interview first appeared in the anthology *Und jetzt?: Politik, Protest und Propaganda* [*And Now?: Politics, Protest and Propaganda*], ed. Heinrich Geiselberger, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2007. The interview took place in London in 2007, with Elke Wagner.

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

3 Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London and New York: Verso, 2005.

4 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005.