04 2008

# Critique as Counter-Hegemonic Intervention

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To approach the question that we have been asked to examine: 'What is critique?', the first move will necessarily consist in making a decision concerning the form of critique that one is going to address. Indeed there are many different understandings of the nature of critique and the grammars that correspond to them are very diverse. Should we envisage the activity of critique in terms of judgment or in terms of practice? Is it, as it is often claimed a self-conscious activity linked to the Enlightenment and characteristic of modernity? All those are questions that could lead to very different treatments of the topic. Moreover, as Foucault has rightly noted, critique cannot be defined apart from its objects and is therefore condemned to dispersion. If we were to restrict our investigation to social criticism, this would limit the field of possible meanings but crucial disagreements will nonetheless remain. For instance between Habermas who argues that social criticism depends on a form of critical theory of society - of the type of his theory of communicative action - providing the ground for making strong normative judgments and others, who, like Foucault, envisage criticism as a practice of resistance.

My objective here will be very specific. I will limit myself to the field of social criticism and more precisely still to the relation

between social criticism and radical politics. I intend to scrutinize one of the currently most fashionable views of social criticism today, which visualizes radical politics in terms of desertion and exodus and to contrast it with the hegemonic approach that I have been advocating in my work. My aim is to bring to the fore the main differences between those approaches, which one could roughly distinguish as 'critique as withdrawal from' and 'critique as engagement with' and to show how they stem from conflicting theoretical frameworks and understandings of the political. I will argue that ultimately the problem with the form of radical politics advocated by Post-Operaist thinkers like Negri and Virno is that they have a flawed understanding of the political because they do not acknowledge the ineradicable dimension of antagonism.

**Critique as Withdrawal From**

The model of social criticism and radical politics put forward by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* and *Multitude* calls for a total break with modernity and the elaboration of a post-modern approach. In their view such a break is required because of the crucial transformations undergone by our societies since the last decades of the 20$^{th}$ century. Those changes, which are the consequences of the process of globalization and the transformations in the work process brought about by workers' struggles, can be broadly resumed in the following way:

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 stage of imperialism that was still 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. This transformation corresponds, they say, to the transformation of the capitalist mode of production in which the role of the industrial factory labor has been reduced and priority given to communicative, cooperative and affective labor. In the post-modernization of the global economy, the creation of wealth tends towards biopolitical production. The object of the rule of empire is social life in its entirety; it presents 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 dispositives or apparatus that produce and regulate customs, habits and productive practices with the help of disciplinary institutions like prisons, factory, asylum, hospital, schools and others. The society of control in contrast is a society in which mechanisms of command become immanent to the social field, distributed to the brains and bodies of the citizens. The modes of social integration and exclusion are increasingly interiorized through mechanisms that directly organize the brains and bodies. 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 labor' and 'general intellect' help us to grasp the relation between social production and biopower. The central role

previously occupied by the labor-power of mass factory workers in the production of surplus-value is today increasingly filled by intellectual, immaterial and communicative labor-power. The figure of immaterial labor involved in communication, cooperation and the reproduction of affects occupies an increasingly central position in the schema of capitalist production.

5. Since in the passage to postmodernity and biopolitical production, labor power has become increasingly collective and social, a new term is needed to refer to this collective worker, it is the 'Multitude'. Hardt and Negri believe that the passage to Empire opens new possibilities for the liberation of the Multitude. They see the construction of Empire 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. 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.

At this point it is worth introducing the work of Paolo Virno to complement the picture. Virno's analyses in his book *Grammar of the Multitude* dovetail in many respects with those of Hardt and Negri but there are also some significant differences. For instance, he 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 and he acknowledges the new forms of subjection and precarization which 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 labor 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 which 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, which 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 according to him 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 which never aspire to transform themselves into a majority and develop a power that refuses to become government. Its mode of being 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 framework it is generally located. In the case of the Multitude it does not mean

any more 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 a stake is a radical disobedience, which puts in question the State's very faculty of command.

With respect of how they envisage the type of political action better suited to the liberation of the Multitude, there is, it seems to me, no fundamental difference between Virno and Hardt and Negri who also advocate desertion and exodus. They argue that, since in Empire there is no more outside, the struggles must be against in every place. This 'being against' is for them the key to every political position in the world and the Multitude must recognize imperial sovereignty as the enemy and discover adequate means of subverting its power. Whereas in the disciplinary era sabotage was the fundamental form of resistance, they claim that in the era of imperial control it should be 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 postmodernity.

Another important point of agreement 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 is, according to them, that it is represented in a unity, with one will, and that it is linked to the existence of the State. The Multitude, at 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 any more in terms of a sovereign authority that is representative of the people and that new forms of democracy which are non-representative are needed.

To resume, we could say that according to this model, the activity of critique corresponds to a form of negation, which consists in withdrawal from existing institutions.

**Critique as Hegemonic Engagement With**

I will now turn to presenting the way I envisage the form of social criticism best suited to radical politics today. I concord with the previous writers on the need to take account of the crucial transformations in the mode of regulation of capitalism brought about by the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism, but I consider that the dynamics of this transition is better apprehended within the framework of the theory of hegemony that we have put forward in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* written jointly with Ernesto Laclau. I agree with the importance of not seeing those transformations as the mere consequence of technological progresses and of bringing to the fore their political dimension. What I want to stress however is that many factors have contributed to this transition and that it is necessary to recognize its complex nature. My problem with the Operaist and Post-Operaist view is that, by putting so much emphasis on the workers's struggles, they tend to see this transition as if it was driven by one single logic: workers's resistance to the process of exploitation forcing the capitalists to reorganize the process of production and to move to Post-Fordism with its centrality of immaterial labor. In their view, capitalism can

only be reactive and they refuse to accept the creative role played both by capital and by labor. What they deny is in fact the role played in this transition by the hegemonic struggle and as I will argue in a moment this is due to their immanentist ontology and their refusal to acknowledge the political in its antagonistic dimension.

According to the approach that I am advocating the two key concepts to address the question of the political are 'antagonism' and 'hegemony'. On one side it is necessary to acknowledge the dimension of the political as the ever present possibility of antagonism and this requires, on the other side, coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the undecidability that pervades every order. This means recognizing the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and envisaging society as the product of a series of practices whose aim is to establish order in a context of contingency. The practices of articulation through which a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed, are what we call 'hegemonic practices.' Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Things could always have been otherwise and every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. It is always the expression of a particular structure of power relations. What is at a given moment accepted as the 'natural order', jointly with the common sense that accompanies it, is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices; it is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity exterior to the practices that bring it into being. Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices which attempt to disarticulate it in order to install another form of hegemony.

I submit that it is necessary to introduce this hegemonic dimension when one envisages the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism.

This means abandoning the view that one single logic, workers's struggles, is at work in the evolution of the work process and acknowledging the pro-active role played by capital. In order to do this we can find interesting insights in the work of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello who in their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* bring to light the way in which capitalists manage to use the demands for autonomy of the new movements that develop in the 1960ies, harnessing them in the development of the Post-Fordist networked economy and transforming them into new forms of control. 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, were 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 interesting in this approach is that it shows how an important dimension of the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism is a process of discursive re-articulation of existing discourses and practices, allowing us to visualize this transition in terms of a 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' to refer to a situation where demands which challenge the hegemonic order are recuperated by the existing system by satisfying them in a way that neutralizes their subversive potential. When we apprehend the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism within such a framework, we can understand it as a hegemonic move by capital to re-establish its leading role and restore its challenged legitimacy.

It is clear that, once we envisage social reality in terms of hegemonic practices, the process of social critique characteristic of

radical politics cannot consist any more in a withdrawal from the existing institutions but in an engagement with them in order to disarticulate the existing discourses and practices through which the current hegemony is established and reproduced, with the aim of constructing a different one. Such a process I want to stress cannot merely consist in separating the different elements whose discursive articulation is at the origin of those practices and institutions. The second moment, the moment of re-articulation is crucial. Otherwise we will be faced with a chaotic situation of pure dissemination, leaving the door open for attempts of re-articulation by non-progressive forces. Indeed we have many historical examples of situations in which the crisis of the dominant order led to right-wing solutions. It is therefore important that the moment of de-identification, be accompanied with a moment of re-identification and that the critique and disarticulation of the existing hegemony will go hand in hand with a process of rearticulation. This is something that is missed by all approaches in terms 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. It is also missed, albeit in a different way, by the theorists of the Multitude, who believe that its oppositional consciousness does not require political articulation. According to the hegemonic approach, social reality is discursively constructed and identities are always the result of processes of identification. It is through insertion in a manifold of practices and languages games that specific forms of individualities are constructed. The political has a primary structuring role because social relations are ultimately contingent and any prevailing articulation results from an antagonistic confrontation whose outcome is not decided in advance. What is needed is therefore a strategy whose objective is, through a set of counter-hegemonic interventions, to disarticulate the existing hegemony and to

establish a more progressive one thanks to a process of re-articulation of new and old elements into different configuration of power.

**Conclusion**

I think that it is important to realize that the differences between the two approaches that I have presented stem from the very different ontologies that provide their theoretical framework. The strategy of exodus, based on an ontology of immanence, supposes the possibility of a redemptive leap into a society, beyond politics and sovereignty, where the Multitude would be able to immediately rule itself and act in concert without the need of law or the state and where antagonism would have disappeared. The hegemonic strategy in contrast, recognizes that antagonism is irreducible and that as a consequence social objectivity can never be fully constituted and that, as a consequence, a fully inclusive consensus and an absolute democracy are never available. According to the immanentist view, the primary ontological terrain is one of multiplicity. In many cases, it also relies on a vitalist ontology according to which the physical and social world in its entirety is seen as the expression of some underlying life force. In all its versions the problem with this immanentist view is its incapacity to give account of the role of radical negativity, i.e antagonism. To be sure negation is present in those theorists, and they even use the term 'antagonism', but this negation is not envisaged as radical negativity. It is either conceived in the mode of dialectical contradiction or simply as a real opposition. As we have shown in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, to be able to envisage negation in the mode of antagonism requires a different ontological approach where the primary ontological terrain is one of division, of failed unicity. Antagonism is not graspable in a problematic that sees the

society as a homogeneous space because this is incompatible with the recognition of radical negativity. As Ernesto Laclau has stressed, the two poles of antagonism are linked by a non-relational relation, they do not belong to the same space of representation and they are essentially heterogeneous with each other. It is out of this irreducible heterogeneity that they emerge. In order to make room for radical negativity, we need to abandon the immanentist idea of a homogeneous saturated social space and acknowledge the role of heterogeneity. This requires relinquishing the idea of a society beyond division and power, without any need for law or the state and where in fact politics would have disappeared.

It could be argued that the strategy of exodus is the reformulation in a different vocabulary of the idea of communism as it was found in Marx. Indeed there are many points in common between the views of the Post-Operaists and the traditional Marxist conception. To be sure, for them it is not any more the proletariat but the Multitude which is the privileged political subject but in both cases the State is seen 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.

If our approach has been called 'Post-Marxist' it is precisely because we have challenged the type of ontology subjacent to such a conception. By bringing to the fore the dimension of negativity which impedes the full totalization of society, we have put into question the very possibility of such a reconciled society. To acknowledge the ineradicability of antagonism implies recognizing that every form of order is necessarily a hegemonic one and that heterogeneity cannot be eliminated; antagonistic heterogeneity points to the limits of constitution of social objectivity. As far as politics is concerned, this means the need to envisage it in terms of a hegemonic struggle between conflicting hegemonic projects

attempting to incarnate the universal and to define the symbolic parameters of social life. Hegemony is obtained through the construction of nodal points, which discursively fix the meaning of institutions and social practices and articulate the 'common sense' through which a given conception of reality is established. Such a result will always be contingent and precarious and susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic interventions. Politics always takes place in a field crisscrossed by antagonisms and to envisage it as 'acting in concert' leads to erasing the ontological dimension of antagonism (that I have proposed to call 'the political') which provides its quasi-transcendental condition of possibility. A properly political intervention is always one that engages with a certain aspect of the existing hegemony in order to disarticulate/re-articulate its constitutive elements. It can never be merely oppositional or conceived as desertion because it aims at re-articulating the situation in a new configuration.

Another important aspect of a hegemonic politics lies in establishing a 'chain of equivalences' between various demands, so as to transform them into claims that will challenge the existing structure of power relations. It is clear that the ensemble of democratic demands that exist in our societies do not necessarily converge and they can even be in conflict with each other. This is why they need to be articulated politically. What is at stake is the creation of a common identity, a 'we' and this requires the determination of a 'they'. This again is missed by the various advocates of the Multitude, who seem to believe that it possesses a natural unity which does not need political articulation. According to Virno, for instance, the Multitude has already something in common: the general intellect. His critique (shared by Hardt and Negri) of the notion of the People as being homogeneous and expressed in a unitary general will which does not leave room for

multiplicity and is totally misplaced when directed to 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. As we have repeatedly emphasized, a relation of equivalence does not eliminate difference-that would be simply identity. It is only as far as 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 defining 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 needs to be launched in a multiplicity of sites. This can only be done by establishing links between social movements, political parties and tradeunions. To create, through the construction of a chain of equivalence, a collective will, to engage with a wide range of institutions, with the aim of transforming them, this is, in my view, the kind of critique that should inform radical politics.