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The Institution of Critique

Hito Steyerl

In speaking about the critique of institution, the problem we ought to consider is the opposite one: the institution of critique. Is there anything like an institution of critique and what does it mean? Isn't it pretty absurd to argue that something like this exists, at a moment, when critical cultural institutions are undoubtedly being dismantled, underfunded, subjected to the demands of a neoliberal event economy and so on? However, I would like to pose the question on a much more fundamental level. The question is: what is the internal relationship between critique and institution? What sort of relation exists between the institution and its critique or on the other hand – the institutionalisation of critique? And what is the historical and political background for this relationship?

To get a clearer picture of this relationship we must first consider the function of criticism in general. On a very general level, certain political, social or individual subjects are formed through the critique of institution. The bourgeois subjectivity as such was formed through such a process of critique, and encouraged to exit the self-inflicted immaturity, to quote Kants famous aphorism. This critical subjectivity was of course ambivalent, since it entailed the use of reason only in those situations we would consider as apolitical today, namely in the deliberation of abstract problems, but not the criticism of authority. Critique produces a subject which should make use of his reason in public circumstances, but

not in private ones. While this sounds emancipatory, the opposite is the case. The criticism of authority is according to Kant futile and private. Freedom consists in accepting that authority should not be questioned. Thus, this form of criticism produces a very ambivalent and governable subject, it is in fact a tool of governance just as much as it is the tool of resistance as which it is often understood. But the bourgeois subjectivity which was thus created was very efficient. And in a certain sense, institutional criticism is integrated into that subjectivity, something which Marx and Engels explicitly refer to in their Communist manifesto, namely as the capacity of the bourgeoisie to abolish and to melt down outdated institutions, everything useless and petrified, as long as the general form of authority itself isn't threatened. The bourgeois class had formed through a limited, so to speak institutionalised critique and also maintained and reproduced itself through this form of institutional critique. And thus, critique had become an institution in itself, a governmental tool which produces streamlined subjects.

But there is also another form of subjectivity which is produced by criticism and also institutional criticism. For example, most obviously the political subject of French citizens was formed through an institutional critique of the French monarchy. This institution was eventually abolished and even beheaded. In this process, an appeal was already realised that Karl Marx was to launch much later: the weapons of critique should be replaced by the critique of weapons. In this vein one could say that the proletariat as a political subject was produced through the criticism of the bourgeoisie as an institution. This second form produces probably just as ambivalent subjectivites, but there is a crucial difference: it abolishes the institution which it criticises instead of reforming or improving it.

So in this sense institutional critique serves as a tool of subjectivation of certain social groups or political subjects. And which sort of different subjects does it produce? Let's take a look at different modes of institutional critique within the artfield of the last decades.

To simplify a complex development: the first wave of institutional criticism in the art sphere in the seventies questioned the authoritarian role of the cultural institution. It challenged the authority which had accumulated in cultural institutions within the framework of the nation state. Cultural institutions such as museums had taken on a complex governmental function. This role has been brillantly described by Benedict Anderson in his seminal work *Imagined Communities*, when he analyzes the role of the museum in the formation of colonial nation states. In his view, the museum, in creating a national past, retroactively also created the origin and foundation of the nation and that was its main function. But this colonial situation, as in many other cases, points at the structure of the cultural institution within the nation state in general. And this situation, the authoritarian legitimation of the nation state by the cultural institution through the construction of a history, a patrimony, a heritage, a canon and so on, was the one that the first waves of institutional critique set out to criticize in the 1970ies.

Their legitimation in doing so was an ultimately political one. Most nation states considered themselves as democracies which were founded on the political mandate of the people or the citizens. In that sense, it was easy to argue that any national cultural institution should reflect this self-definition and that any national cultural institution should thus be founded on similar

mechanisms. If the political national sphere was – at least in theory – based on democratic participation, why should the cultural national sphere and it´s construction of histories and canons be any different? Why shouldn't the cultural institution be at least as representative as parliamentary democracy? Why shouldn't it include for example women in its canon, if women were at least in theory accepted in parliament? In that sense the claims that the first wave of institutional critique voiced were of course founded in contemporary theories of the public sphere, and based on an interpretation of the cultural institution as a potential public sphere. But implicitly they relied on two fundamental assumptions: First, this public sphere was implicitly a national one because it was modeled after the model of representative parliamentarism. The legitimation of institutional critique was based precisely on this point. Since the political system of the nation state is at least in theory representative of its citizens, why shoudn't a national cultural institution be? Their legitimation rested on this analogy which was also more often than not rooted in material circumstances, since most cultural institutions were funded by the state. Thus, this form of instutional critique relied on a model based on the structure of political participation within the nation state and a fordist economy, in which taxes could be collected for such purposes.

Institutional critique of this period related to these phenomena in different ways. Either by radically negating institutions alltogether, by trying to build alternative institutions or by trying to be included into mainstream ones. Just as in the political arena, the most effective strategy was a combination of the second and third model, which claimed for example the inclusion into the cultural institution of minorities or disadvantaged majorities such as women. In that sense institutional critique functioned like the

related paradigms of multiculturalism, reformist feminism, ecological movements and so on. It was a new social movement within the arts scene.

But during the next wave of institutional criticism which happened in the Nineties, the situation was a bit different. It wasn't so much different from the point of view of the artists or those who tried to challenge and criticize the institutions which, in their view, were still authoritarian. Rather, the main problem was that they had been overtaken by a right-wing form of bourgeois institutional criticism, precisely the one which Marx and Engels described and which melts down everything which is solid. Thus, the claim that the cultural institution ought to be a public sphere was no longer unchallenged. The bourgoisie had sort of decided that in their view a cultural institution was primarily an economic one and as such had to be subjected to the laws of the market. The belief that cultural institutions ought to provide a representative public sphere broke down with Fordism, and it is not by chance that, in a sense, institutions which still adhere to the ideal to create a public sphere have been in place for a much longer time in places where Fordism is still hanging on. Thus, the second wave of institutional critique was in a sense unilateral since claims were made which at that time had at least partially lost their legitimative power.

The next factor was the relative transformation of the national cultural sphere which mirrored the transformation of the political cultural sphere. First of all, the nation state is no longer the only framework of cultural representation – there are also supranational bodies like the EU. And secondly, their mode of political representation is very complicated and only partly representative. It represents is constituencies rather symbolically than materially. To

use a German differentiation of the word representation: Sie stellen sie eher dar, als sie sie vertreten. Thus, why should a cultural institution materially represent its constituency? Isn't it somehow sufficient to symbolically represent it? And although the production of a national cultural identity and heritage is still important, it is not only important for the interior or social cohesion of the nation, but also very much to provide it with international selling points in an increasingly globalised cultural economy. Thus, in a sense, a process was initiated which is still going on today. That is the process of the cultural or symbolic integration of critique into the institution or rather on the surface of the institution without any material consequences within the institution itself or its organisation. This mirrors a similar process on the political level: the symbolic integration, for example of minorities, while keeping up political and social inequality, the symbolic representation of constituencies into supranational political bodies and so on. In this sense the bond of material representation was broken and replaced with a more symbolic one.

This shift in representational techniques by the cultural institution also mirrored a trend in criticism itself, namely the shift from a critique of institution towards a critique of representation. This trend, which was informed by Cultural Studies, feminist and postcolonial epistemologies, somehow continued in the vein of the previous institutional critique by comprehending the whole sphere of representation as a public sphere, where material representation ought to be implemented, for example in form of the unbiased and proportional display of images of black persons or women. This claim somehow mirrors the confusion about representation on the political plane, since the realm of visual representation is even less representative in the material sense than a supranational political body. It doesn't represent constituencies or subjectivities but

creates them, it articulates bodies, affects and desires. But this is not exactly how it was comprehended, since it was rather taken for a sphere where one has to achieve a hegemony, a so to speak majority on the level of symbolic representation, in order to achieve an improvement of a diffuse area, which hovers between politics and economy, between the state and the market, between the subject as citizen and the subject as consumer, and between representation and representation. Since criticism could no longer establish clear antagonisms in this sphere, it started to fragment and to atomize it and to support a politics of identity which led to the fragmentation of public spheres, markets, to the culturalisation of identity and so on.

This representational critique pointed at another aspect, namely the unmooring of the seemingly stable relation between the cultural institution and the nation state. Unfortunately for institutional critics of that period, a model of purely symbolic representation gained legitimacy in this field as well. Institutions no longer claimed to materially represent the nation state and its constituency, but only claimed to represent it symbolically. And thus, while one could say that the former institutional critics were either integrated into the institution or not, the second wave of institutional criticism was integrated not into the institution but into representation as such. Thus, again, a janusfaced subject was formed. This subject was interested in more diversity in representation, less homogeneous than its predecessor. But in trying to create this diversity, it also created niche markets, specialised consumer profiles, and an overall spectacle of „difference“ – without effectuating much structural change.

But which conditions are prevailing today, during what might tentatively be called an extension of the second wave of institutional critique? Artistic strategies of institutional critique have become increasingly complex. They have fortunately developed far beyond the the ethnographic urge to indiscriminately drag underprivileged or unusual constituencies into museums, even against their will – just for the sake of „representation". They include detailed investigations, such as for example Allan Sekula's Fish Story, which connects a phenomenology of new cultural industries, like the Bilbao Guggenheim, with documents of other institutional constraints, such as those imposed by the WTO or other global economic organisations. They have learned to walk the tightrope between the local and the global without becoming either indigenist and ethnographic, or else unspecific and snobbish. Unfortunately this cannot be said of most cultural institutions which would have to react to the same challenge of having to perform both within a national cultural sphere and an increasingly globalising market.

If you look at them from one side, then you will see that they are under pressure from indigenist, nationalist and nativist claims. If you look from the other side, then you will see that they are under pressure from neoliberal institutional critique, that is under the pressure of the market. Now the problem is – and this is indeed a very widespread attitude – that when a cultural institution comes under pressure from the market, it tries to retreat into a position which claims that it is the duty of the nation state to fund it and to keep it alive. The problem with that position is that it is an ultimately protectionist one, that it ultimately reinforces the construction of national public spheres and that under this perspective the cultural institution can only be defended in the framework of a new leftist attitude which tries to retreat into the

ruins of a demolished national welfare state and its cultural shells and to defend them against all intruders. That is – it tends to defend itself ultimately from the perspective of its other enemies, namely the nativist and indigenist critics of institution, who want to transform it into a sort of sacralised ethnopark. But there is no going back to the old fordist nation state protectionism with its cultural nationalism, at least not in any emancipatory perspective.

On the other hand, when the cultural institution is attacked from this nativist, indigenist perspective, it also tries to defend itself by appealing to universal values like freedom of speech or the cosmopolitanism of the arts, which are so utterly commodified as either shock effects or the display of enjoyable cultural difference that they hardly exist beyond this form of commodification. Or it might even earnestly try to reconstruct a public sphere within market conditions, for example with the massive temporary spectacles of criticism funded let's say by the German Bundeskulturstiftung. But under the ruling economic circumstances, the main effect achieved is to integrate the critics into precarity, into flexibilised working structures within temporary project structures and freelancer work within cultural industries. And in the worst cases, those spectacles of criticism are the decoration of large enterprises of economic colonialism such as in the colonisation of Eastern Europe by the same institutions which are producing the conceptual art in these regions.

If the first wave of institutional critique, criticism produced integration into the institution, the second one only achieved integration into representation. But in the third phase the only integration which seems to be easily achieved is the one into precarity. And in this sense we can nowadays answer the question concerning the function of the institution of critique as follows: while critical institutions are being dismantled by neoliberal

institutional criticism, this produces an ambivalent subject which develops multiple strategies for dealing with its dislocation. It is on the one side being adapted to the needs of ever more precarious living conditions. On the other, there seems to have hardly ever been more need for institutions which could cater to the new needs and desires that this constituency will create.