

BARCELONA ART REPORT 2001 EXPERIÈNCIES⁰¹

És una iniciativa de:

Ajuntament de Barcelona
Institut de
Cultura.

MAC
BA Museu d'Art
Contemporani
de Barcelona

Centre de Cultura Contemporània
de Barcelona

ANTAGONISMS. Case studies

PRESENTATION TO THE MEDIA: 25 July, 2001, 11:30 a.m.

Inauguration: 26 July, 8:00 p.m.

Exhibition dates: 27 July - 14 October, 2001

Curators: José Lebrero Stals, Manuel J. Borja-Villel.

BARCELONA ART REPORT 2001. EXPERIENCES presents on July 26 the exhibition *Antagonisms. Case studies*, which will take place at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). *Antagonisms* is a project of museological research which explores the presence of political aspects and an activist dimension in art practices from the sixties up to the present. The exhibition presents a series of 'case studies' or specific projects in which the aesthetic object is used as an instrument of social observation and critical practice, and in which artistic attitudes of cultural resistance are explicitly manifested.

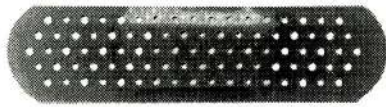
To this end the show brings together a number of works that are essential to any understanding of a particular artist's personal evolution, alongside more occasional samples of other artists' work which, without necessarily being a core expression of their discourse, represented in their day a clearly committed position in relation to certain social conflicts. *Antagonisms* is not articulated as the outcome of some supposedly exhaustive, encyclopaedic investigation, but as an expository essay centred on the study and the testing out of the actual political effectiveness of certain data —works and documents— that offer a basis for a fuller understanding of the historical period that is analysed in the proposed conceptual framework.

At a time when the museum has lost much of the critical social credibility formerly assigned to it as an inclusive, agglutinative space capable of guaranteeing and legitimating the transformative potential of art, one of the central intentions of *Antagonisms* is precisely to help reinstate propositions which in many cases were conceived, generated and shown outside the boundaries of institutions of this kind. The exhibition features works by some fifty artists, mostly from Europe, the United States and Latin America, such as Carl Andre, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Harun Farocki, Victor Grippo, Guerrilla Girls, Grup de Treball, Hans Haacke, Rogelio López Cuenca, Gordon Matta-Clark, Mario Merz, Antoni Muntadas, Lygia Pape, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Pedro G. Romero, Allan Sekula, Alexander Sokurov, Jeff Wall, Andy Warhol and Krzysztof Wodiczko, among others.

NEXT TEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS AT MACBA:

OUT OF PRINT. From October 25th 2001 to January 6th, 2002

ONNASCH COLLECTION. From November 7th, 2001 to January 13th, 2002



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ANTAGONISMS

Case Studies

ARTISTS

- ACT UP
- AGUSTÍN PAREJO SCHOOL
- CARL ANDRE
- ELEANOR ANTIN
- MICHAEL ASHER
- ALIGHIERO & BOETTI
- MARCEL BROODTHAERS
- DANIEL BUREN
- HARUN FAROCKI
- HANS-PETER FELDMANN
- JOCHEN GERZ
- VICTOR GRIPPO
- GROUP MATERIAL
- GRUP DE TREBALL
- GUERRILLA GIRLS
- HANS HAACKE
- DAVID HAMMONS
- JÖRG IMMENDORFF
- ALEXANDER KLUGE
- KUNSTAKADEMIE DÜSSELDORF
- DAVID LAMELAS
- ROGELIO LÓPEZ CUENCA
- CHRIS MARKER
- GORDON MATTA-CLARK
- CILDO MEIRELES
- MARIO MERZ
- GUSTAV METZGER
- CHRISTIAN PHILIPP MÜLLER
- ANTONI MUNTADAS
- BRUCE NAUMAN
- O + I
- LYGIA PAPE
- MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO
- PEDRO G. ROMERO
- ALLAN SEKULA
- SERVICES
- INTERNACIONAL SITUACIONISTA
- ALEXANDER SOKUROV
- KLAUS STAECK
- THINK AGAIN
- TUCUMAN ARDE
- ISIDORO VALCARCEL MEDINA
- JEFF WALL
- ANDY WARHOL
- STEPHEN WILLATS
- KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO

ANTAGONISMS

Case studies

FILMS / VIDEOS

- VITO ACCONCI
- ACT UP
- ANT FARM
- ARIELLA AZOULAY
- URSULA BIEMANN
- DARA BIRNBAUM
- COLECTIVO CADA "ACCIONES DE ARTE"
- DIAS & RIEDWEG
- MARCELO EXPÓSITO, ARTURO RODRÍGUEZ
i GABRIEL VILLOTA
- ADRIAN PIPER
- YVONNE RAINER
- MARTHA ROSLER
- @TMARK
- RICHARD SERRA
- TVTV
- CECILIA VICUÑA
- VIDEO NOU

Critical art and social conflicts

We are living at a time when, with the justification of a supposed anti-idealism and the disappearance of the Subject, notions such as the public sphere, the critical space or class conflict are tending to disappear, or rather to be regarded as unnecessary. Today we are seeing the emergence of a host of political subjectivities (ethnic, gay, ecological, feminist, religious). However, that multiculturalism is most often more a celebration of the diversity of styles and differences which essentially sustain a subterranean One, in which productive radical and antagonistic difference is obliterated. The truth, for that host of sexes, is Unisex, the suppression of difference in favour of a whole which is the container of the multitude. That suppression is undoubtedly based on the exclusion of the public space: the common place where plural identities can come together and antagonise and which forms the basis of any democratic project.

Politically speaking, multiculturalism is one of the dominant aspects of the ideology of capital in a globalised economy, which serves to conceal rather than reveal differences. Recently, for example, we have seen a succession of art exhibitions and events presenting “new” Chinese art. Shows such as *The New Chinese Art* (San Francisco, MOMA, 1999) and especially the 47th Venice Biennale were highly significant. Through a massive inclusion of artists of Chinese origin in the official section, the Biennale provided a sounding board for the processes of economic, financial, commercial and technical integration and homogenisation. It is true that in exhibitions like this one, the differences between the West and China disappear or are reduced to merely formal characters. Real problems, such as the fact that in a world of transnationals China has been put in charge of replacing the Western working class, or that in the West manual work has come to be regarded as a genuine obscenity, are hidden.

As Julia Kristeva remarked some years ago, there is a good deal of talk about the return of fascism, religious fundamentalism, nationalism. But those phenomena are no more than brutal, archaic sicknesses, temporary outbreaks –let us hope– in our societies which democracy must eventually neutralise. The real danger comes from a system that tends to schematise singularity –even as perversely as certain theoretical defenders of multiculturalism maintain–, depriving individuals of their psychic specificity. In society today, whatever is exceptional about human beings runs the risk of being made banal. Today everyone seems to adjust to a standardised hierarchy of the image expected of them. At the

same time, individuals are gradually ceasing to assume their own responsibilities. The aim of culture is a problem today. Culture as a critical rebellion, which emerged in Ancient Greece, culture as an element of liberation, is in danger of disappearing as it is increasingly transformed into a product ready to be consumed.

In that context –and at a time when the new entertainment society is beginning to become the natural thing– there was a reaction from groups of intellectuals and artists who, after the Second World War, thought it essential to return to a culture of rebellion that would enable us to conserve our psychic reality and cultivate memory and subjectivity. Such was particularly the case of Guy Debord and the other members of the Situationist International who, from the late fifties, drafted strategies for action in which they rethought the role of the artist, his activity and his relation to the spectator in the context of the new society. We were up against the evident logic that any act of rebellion, at least as it had been conceived by modernity, is doomed to be assimilated by the system that makes it possible. His influence on many later artists, such as Gordon Matta-Clark or even figures or groups from popular culture, such as Malcolm McLaren or the Sex Pistols, has been clear. The importance certain film practices have had for the situationists' strategies has also been vital in understanding the works of artists today who use the cinema in a way which is incompatible with the economy of show business.

Most of the artists in the exhibition are aware of the risks of acting *in* culture while at the same time opposing that culture, and even culture as a whole, as an entity separated from the reality of the world. One of the aspects they try to clarify is how each individual can confront what seems to be the institutional assimilation of art by force. Following Duchamp, artists like Marcel Broodthaers in the seventies or Philippe Thomas in the eighties and nineties found the solution by transforming their exhibitions into decors, or having their works (in Thomas's case) signed by the collectors themselves. In that way they anticipated, and to a certain extent averted, the ultimate fate of the art object when it is assimilated by the system; in other words, its conservation, literally made sacred in a container that allows journeys in time and space, the multiplicity of ownership and the attribution of meaning.

Still based on an idealistic and romantic spirit, many of the postulates of modernity structured an ideal, utopian place, as well as a supposedly natural and spontaneous language. That utopian place reaches its perfect incarnation in the museum, where an indeterminate number of artefacts are grouped according to an internal logic which tends to dispel any historical or geographical diversity. Art in the museum thus becomes an ontological category not created by men in

particular historical circumstances, but by the notion of universal, ahistorical Man. As a result, there has been a tendency to regard history as something single and coherent, written with proper names, and part of a formal evolution which now seems to have been cut off by a kind of global eclecticism which, as we were saying, only replaces one idea of subject with another. It is therefore no surprise that there have still been marginal and clearly disfigured art movements and projects in our recent history. The role played in the USA by groups such as Art Workers' Coalition, Women Artists and Revolution, or events such as the Artists' Protest Tower (1966), Angry Arts (1967), or the exhibition *Information* (1970), has been silenced.

Likewise, one of the most significantly mistaken perceptions in relation to the new critical attitudes in the art world of our time has been to acknowledge the importance of Minimalism only as the final chapter in the history of abstraction, the culmination of "art for art's sake". However, as an invitation to activism and to a political and "realistic" art, the Minimalist device (especially in the world of dance and music) presupposes a break with the idealistic space of traditional sculpture by introducing into the work of art the question of the perception of the space of social reality, as well as anti-rhetorical and anti-expressive, non-hierarchical, strategies. In outline, the evolution of a certain formalism towards social activism can be clearly seen in the work of artists such as Yvonne Rainer, Hans Haacke, Carl Andre or Adrian Piper. From a certain moment, the works of those artists reformulate the traditional relation between object and spectator. The results are open and guarantee the spectator an unprecedented degree of interaction and control over the artistic experience. These are literal presences that question the capacity of objects to transcend the real world and take it to the level of art. Between the spectator and the object a "theatrical" interrelation is established, a theatre that may involve the representation of the negation of art itself, and also means a critical approach to the way things are in the previously ordered world. That experience is absolutely dependent on literal perceptions, totally incompatible with idealised and harmonic modernist painting and sculpture.

Manuel J. Borja-Villel

Antagonisms. Case studies

Antagonisms is a research project which examines some political and activist aspects of artistic practices since the sixties. The exhibition presents “case studies” or specific projects in which the aesthetic object is used as a tool for social observation and critical practice and which explicitly manifest artistic attitudes of cultural resistance. Here works central to an understanding of the personal careers of certain authors are combined with occasional contributions from other artists which, while not necessarily being one of the cores of their discourse, clearly represented a stance taken at the time towards particular social conflicts. So, for example Marcel Broodthaers' *La Salle Blanche* (1975) and Alighiero & Boetti's *12 forme del giugno* (1967) share the same space. Boetti reacts “artistically” to the armed conflicts that were taking place in different parts of the world at the time, drawing a cartography of condemnation. With one of his fundamental works, like most of the participants in *Antagonisms*, Broodthaers shows that he is aware of the risks of acting in a culture while simultaneously opposing it, or even understanding it as an entity apart. How to deal with the almost forced institutional assimilation of art? In the tradition of Marcel Duchamp, he offers a possible solution by transforming his exhibitions into décors, or multiplying the social function of the figure of the artist.

The chronological beginning of the exhibition coincides with the development of the new entertainment society, after the definitive end of the post-war period. The general ethical stance of the show is inspired by historical documents which are important for placing the issues tackled in it, such as the collection of journals of the Situationist International, published in Paris from 1958. Also in the way in which, in those days, there were reactions from groups of intellectuals and artists who considered it essential to intensify a culture of rebellion. Thus Guy Debord's revolutionary cultural proclamation: “First we think the world needs changing. We want the change which will be the most liberating for the society and the life where we are imprisoned. We know that change is possible through appropriate actions.” It was then, in a number of cities on two continents, that strategies were put forward to redefine the role of the artist, his activity and his relation with the spectator and the context where the cultural transaction takes place. The exhibition covers a period which began then and is still continuing, including works specially produced for it such as Pedro G. Romero's *FX. Sobre el fin del arte*, which deals with idolatry and iconoclasm.

Antagonisms is not structured as the results of a supposed encyclopaedic search, but as an explanatory essay focusing on the study and testing of the current political effectiveness of certain data –works and documents– which help to clarify an understanding of the historical period analysed in the conceptual key proposed. To do so, the example of the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie is included, using an alternative form of exhibition which combines two rhetorics of presentation, that of art objects and that of documentary information, in order to give an account of what happened in the intense period between 1965 and 1975 in that local-international environment. It shows how the university, as a place for the management of knowledge, has the capacity to operate as an engine of collective resistance and social experiment. *Services*, a collective project organised by Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler for the University of Lüneburg (Germany), provides an alternative contemporary art exhibition model, in which information, documents, association, process, distribution and politics are structured as a means of collective critical action and multiple authority, which proposes a fruitful relation between art and cultural studies for the nineties. Therefore, the specific condition of what is selected and its great relevance to a moment which was a landmark in time mark the way of selecting the works and documents.

This show is based on an exploration through essays in recent files and the current state of artistic thought in the West, and on the way some of its most sophisticated visual expressions on the political are fixed in exhibitions. As a result, we believe it is possible for the cases studied in *Antagonisms* to establish certain correspondences –not necessarily cause and effect– with conflictive social events based on complex models of artistic action and reaction, such as May 68 in Europe, the escalation of the Vietnam War in the United States and the repression of the military dictatorships in the seventies in Latin America. All three of them events which marked a generation of intellectuals formed after the end of the postwar period; historical events that still have a certain referential influence on current artistic behaviours which we are interested in here, after the fall of the Berlin Wall or the gradual establishment of a global model for the world economy.

The project accepts the essential difference Chantal Mouffe rightly emphasises between two terms which are close, but still allude to practices which do not overlap. What she calls *politics* is the set of institutional, or even artistic, discourses and practices that help to affirm and reproduce a certain kind of order. On the other hand, there is the idea of “the political”, which corresponds

to the dimension of antagonism; the distinction between friend and enemy. According to Schmitt, that difference may crop up in any kind of relation; it is not a matter of something that can be precisely located. On the contrary, it is a constant present possibility (ever-present). So, because it is always present, the dimension of “the political” never allows the complete, absolute, inclusive hegemony involved in political practice, concerned by its very nature with the system, the reproduction or deconstruction of hegemony.

In this context, Mouffe shows that cultural and artistic practices can play a central role as one of the levels on which identifications and forms of identity are constituted: “One cannot make a distinction between political art and non-political art, because every form of artistic practice either contributes to the reproduction of the given common sense –and in that sense is political– or contributes to the deconstruction or critique of it.”¹

There are well over fifty artists taking part in *Antagonisms*, individually or collectively. However, we consider that the most important part of this exhibition is not the artists’ names. The main thing are the specific works and documents which have been selected; the places and moments they recall, the actions or reactions those individuals or collectives produce in cities in Europe, the United States and Latin America in the face of events with a high social impact, such as the ones mentioned earlier, or the effect of the end of the Cold War on affluent societies, or the conversion of cities into objects to be consumed by tourists. What seems to unite most of the artists taking part is a shared awareness of collective presence at a prolonged global crisis of representation, which is revealed in the aesthetic and the political, in the psychological and the economic. Hence, as Douglas Crimp says in relation to the AIDS crisis, the need for cultural activism as an added value to political activism. An activism understood as the task of collecting and distributing information first of all, but also bearing in mind that in certain circumstances culture can and must play a strong part in political activism, and unequivocally express its potential resistance value. *Antagonisms* provides a summary of the chronicle of forty years of interaction between the two. In that relation there have been moments of high dialectical tension which, as Timothy Clark shows, have forced a renegotiation of the two categories –art and politics–, as happened, for example, in the early seventies with the fruitful artistic reaction to the world of television and its power to disseminate individuality in an endless jungle of reproductions.

¹ Chantal Mouffe. “Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension”, Grey Room n2, winter 2001.

And so what in the crucible of politics is a public demonstration leads to the direct action in Paris of the Situationist International or, a quarter of a century later, in the theatrical performance and feminist militancy of Guerrilla Girls, who published posters and T-shirts with anti-misogynist slogans in New York; Muntadas turns the mass media into an alternative medium for social communication on the first local television channel in Spain in 1974; for Valcárcel Medina, the celebration of institutionalised culture with the opening of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Madrid a year later is a valuable opportunity to infiltrate and reveal the workings of the mechanism of limitation imposed by the very apparatus of official culture.

Antagonisms is being shown at a time when the museum has lost a good deal of the critical credibility that it had been attributed socially as a gathering place and legitimising guarantor of art's potential for transformation. Many of the postulates of modernity still tried to imagine the structuring of a utopia and an innovatory language which would supposedly be natural and spontaneous. The museum is the perfect incarnation of that desire: an indeterminate number of artefacts are grouped according to an internal logic which tends to dispel any historical or geographical diversity. Through that process, the work of art becomes an ontological category which does not seem to be the result of human work done in particular historical circumstances, but the result of an act performed by a universal, ahistorical being.

José Lebrero Stals

FOR A POLITICS OF DEMOCRATIC IDENTITY

In recent decades, the willingness to rely on categories like “human nature”, “universal reason” and “rational autonomous subject” has increasingly been put into question. From diverse standpoints, very different thinkers have criticized the idea of a universal human nature, of a universal canon of rationality through which that nature could be known, as well as the possibility of a universal truth. Such a critique of rationalism and universalism, which is sometimes referred to as “post-modern”, is seen by authors like Jurgen Habermas as a threat to the modern democratic ideal. They affirm that there is a necessary link between the democratic project of the Enlightenment and its epistemological approach and that, as a consequence, to find fault with rationalism and universalism means undermining the very basis of democracy. This explains the hostility of Habermas and his followers towards the different forms of post-Marxism, post-structuralism and post-modernism.

I am going to take issue with such a thesis and argue that it is only by drawing all the implications of the critique of essentialism — which constitutes the point of convergence of all the so-called “posties” — that it is possible to grasp the nature of the political and to reformulate and radicalize the democratic project of the Enlightenment. I believe that it is urgent to realize that the universalist and rationalist framework in which that project was formulated has today become as obstacle to an adequate understanding of the present stage of democratic politics. Such a framework should be discarded and this can be done without having to abandon the political aspect of the Enlightenment which is represented by the democratic revolution.

We should, on this subject, follow the lead of Hans Blumenberg who in his book, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, distinguishes two different logics in the Enlightenment, one of “self-assertion” (political) and one of “self-grounding” (epistemological). According to him, those two logics have been articulated historically but there is no necessary relation between them and they can perfectly be separated. It is therefore possible to discriminate between what is truly modern — the idea of “self-assertion” — and what is merely a “reoccupation” of a medieval position, i.e. an attempt to give a modern answer to a premodern question. In Blumenberg’s view, rationalism is not something essential to the idea of self-assertion but a residue from the absolutist medieval problematic. This illusion of providing itself with its own foundations which accompanied the labour of liberation from theology should now be abandoned and modern reason should acknowledge its limits. Indeed, it is only when it comes to term with pluralism and accepts the impossibility of total control and final harmony that modern reason frees itself from its premodern heritage.

This approach reveals the inadequacy of the term “post-modernity” when it is used to refer to a completely different historical period that would signify a break with modernity. When we realize that rationalism and abstract universalism, far from being constitutive of modern reason were in fact reoccupations of premodern position, it becomes clear that to put them into question does not imply a rejection of modernity but a coming to terms with the potentialities that were inscribed in it since the beginning. It also help us to understand why the critique of the epistemological aspect of the Enlightenment does not put its political aspect of self-assertion into

question but, on the contrary, can help to strengthen the democratic project.

The critique of essentialism

One of the fundamental advance of what I have called the critique of essentialism has been the break with the category of the subject as a rational transparent entity which could convey a homogeneous meaning on the total field of her conduct by being the source of her actions. Psychoanalysis has shown that, far from being organized around the transparency of an ego, personality is structured in a number of levels which lie outside the consciousness and rationality of the agents. It has therefore discredited the idea of the necessarily unified character of the subject. Freud's central claim is that the human mind is necessarily subject to division between two systems, one of which is not and cannot be conscious. The self-mastery of the subject, a central theme of modern philosophy, is precisely what he argues can never be reached. Following Freud and expanding his insight, Lacan has shown the plurality of registers — the Symbolic, the Real and the Imaginary — that penetrate any identity, and the place of the subject as the place of the lack which, though represented within the structure, is the empty place that at the same time subverts and is the condition of the constitution of any identity. The history of the subject is the history of her identifications and there is no concealed identity to be rescued beyond the latter. There is thus a double movement. On the one hand, a movement of decentering which prevents the fixation of a set of positions around a preconstituted point. On the other hand, and as a result of this essential non-fixity, the opposite movement: the institution of nodal points, partial fixations which limit the flux of the signified under the signifier. But the dialectics of non-fixity/fixation is possible only because fixity is not pre-given, because no center of subjectivity precedes the subject's identifications.

I think that it is important to stress that such a critique of essential identities is not limited to a certain current in French theory but is found in the most important philosophies of the twentieth century. For instance, in the philosophy of language of the later Wittgenstein, we also find a critique of the rationalist conception of the subject that indicates that the latter cannot be the source of linguistic meanings since it is through participation in different languages games that the world is disclosed to us. We encounter the same idea in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in the thesis that there exists a fundamental unity between thought, language and the world, and that it is within language that the horizon of our present is constituted. A similar critique of the centrality of the subject in modern metaphysics and of its unitary character can be found in different forms in several other authors and this allow us to affirm that, far from being limited to post-structuralism or post-modernism, the critique of essentialism constitutes the point of convergence of the most important contemporary philosophical currents.

Anti-essentialism and politics

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* we have attempted to draw the consequences of this critique of essentialism for a radical conception of democracy by articulating some of its insights with the gramscian conception of hegemony. This led us to put the question of power and antagonism and their ineradicable character at the center of our approach. One of the main thesis of the book is that social objectivity is

constituted through acts of power. This means that any social objectivity is ultimately political and that it has to show the traces of exclusion which governs its constitution: what following Derrida, we have called its “constitutive outside”. But, if an object has inscribed in its very being something other than itself: if as a result, everything is constructed as difference, its being cannot be conceived as pure “presence” or “objectivity”. This indicates that the logics of the constitution of the social is incompatible with the objectivism and essentialism dominant in social sciences and liberal thought.

The point of convergence -or rather mutual collapse- between objectivity and power is what we have called “hegemony”. This way of posing the problem indicates that power should not be conceived as an external relation taking place between two pre-constituted identities, but rather as constituting the identities themselves. This is really decisive. Because if the “constitutive outside” is present within the inside as its always real possibility, in that case the inside itself becomes a purely contingent and reversible arrangement (in other words, the hegemonic arrangement cannot claim any other source of validity than the power basis on which it is grounded). The structure of mere possibility of any objective order, which is revealed by its mere hegemonic nature is shown in the forms assumed by the subversion of the sign (i.e. of the relation signifier/signified). For instance, the signifier “democracy” is very different when fixed to a certain signified in a discourse that articulates it to “anti-communism” and when it is fixed to another signified in a discourse that makes it part of the total meaning of antifascism. As there is no common ground between those conflicting articulations, there is no way of subsuming them under a deeper objectivity which would reveal its true and deeper essence. This explains the constitutive and irreducible character of antagonism.

The consequences of those thesis for politics are far-reaching. For instance, according to such a perspective, political practice in a democratic society does not consist in defending the rights of preconstituted identities, but rather in constituting those identities themselves in a precarious and always vulnerable terrain. Such an approach also involves a displacement of the traditional relations between “democracy” and “power”. For a traditional socialist conception, the more democratic a society is, the less power would be constitutive of social relations. But if we accept that relations of power are constitutive of the social, then the main question of democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values. To acknowledge the existence of relations of power and the need to transform them while renouncing the illusion that we could free ourselves completely from power, this is what is specific to the project of “radical and plural democracy” that we are advocating.

Another distinct character of our approach concerns the question of the de-universalization of political subjects. We try to break with all forms of essentialism. Not only the essentialism which penetrates to a large extent the basic categories of modern sociology and liberal thought and according to which every social identity is perfectly defined in the historical process of the unfolding of being; but also with its diametrical opposite: a certain type of extreme post-modern fragmentation of the social which refuses to give the fragments any kind of relational identity. Such a view leaves us with a multiplicity of identities without any common denominator and makes it impossible to distinguish between differences that exist but should not exist and differences that do not exist but should exist. In other words, by putting an exclusive emphasis on heterogeneity and incommensurability, it impedes us to

recognize how certain differences are constructed as relations of subordination and should therefore be challenged by a radical democratic politics.

Democracy and Identity

After having given a brief outline of the main tenets of our anti-essentialist approach and of its general implications for politics, I now would like to address some specific problems concerning the construction of democratic identities. I am going to examine how such a question can be formulated within the framework which breaks with the traditional rationalist liberal problematic and that incorporates some crucial insights of the critique of essentialism. One of the main problem with the liberal framework is that it reduces politics to the calcul of interests. Individuals are presented as rational actors moved by the search for the maximization of their self-interest. That is, they are seen as acting in the field of politics in a basically instrumentalist way. Politics is conceived through a model elaborated to study economics, as a market concerned with the allocation of resources, where compromises are reached among interests defined independently of their political articulation. Other liberals, those who rebel against this model and who want to create a link between politics and morality believe that it is possible to create a rational and universal consensus by means of free discussion. They believe that by relegating disruptive issues to the private sphere, a rational agreement on principles should be enough to administer the pluralism of modern societies. For both type of liberals, everything that has to do with passions, with antagonisms, everything that can lead to violence is seen as archaic and irrational: as residues of a bygone age where the “sweet commerce” had not yet established the preeminence of interest over passions.

But this attempt to annihilate the political is doomed to failure because it cannot be domesticated in this way. As was pointed out by Carl Schmitt, the political can derive its energy from the most diverse sources and emerge out of many different social relations: religious, moral, economic, ethnic or other. The political has to do with the dimension of antagonism which is present in social relations, with the ever present possibility of a “us” / “them” relation to be constructed in terms of “friend” / “enemy”. To deny this dimension of antagonism does not make it disappear, it only leads to impotence in recognizing its different manifestations and in dealing with them. This is why a democratic approach needs to come to terms with the ineradicable character of antagonism. One of its main task is to envisage how it is possible to defuse the tendencies to exclusion which are present in all construction of collective identities.

To clarify the perspective that I am putting forward, I propose to distinguish between “the political” and “politics”. By “the political”, I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society, antagonism that, as I said, can take many different forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. “Politics” on the other side refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of “the political”. This view which attempts to keep together the two meanings of “polemos” and “polis” from where the idea of politics comes from is, I believe, crucial if we want to be able to protect and consolidate democracy.

In examining this question the concept of the “constitutive outside” to which I

have referred earlier is particularly helpful. As elaborated by Derrida, its aim is to highlight the fact that the creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference, difference which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy: for example between form and matter, black and white, man and woman, etc. Once we have understood 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” than it which will constitute its “exterior”, then we can begin to understand why such a relation may always become the breeding ground for antagonism. Indeed, when it comes to the creation of a collective identity, basically the creation of an “us” by the demarcation of a “them”, there is always the possibility of that “us” and “them” relationship becoming one of “friend and enemy”, i.e. to become antagonistic. This happens when the “other”, who up until now has been considered simply as different, starts to be perceived as someone who puts in question our identity and threatens our existence. From that moment on, any form of “us and them” relationship, whether it be religious, ethnic, economic or other, becomes political.

It is only when we acknowledge this dimension of “the political” and understand that “politics” consists in domesticating hostility and in trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations, that we can pose the fundamental question for democratic politics. This question, pace the rationalists, is not how to arrive at a rational consensus reached without exclusion, or in other words it is not how to establish an “us” which would not have a corresponding “them”. This is impossible because there cannot exist an “us” without a “them”. What is at stake is how to establish this “us”/“them” discrimination in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy.

In the realm of politics, this presupposes that the “other” is no longer seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an “adversary”, i.e. somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question. We could say that the aim of democratic politics is transform an “antagonism” into an “agonism”. The prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions in a way that promotes democratic designs. Far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence.

Modern democracy’s specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order. Breaking with the symbolic representation of society as an organic body — which is characteristic of the holist mode of social organization — a democratic society makes room for the expression of conflicting interests and values. For that reason pluralist democracy demands not only consensus on a set of common exhico???? political principles but also the presence of dissent and institutions through which such divisions can be manifested. This is why its survival depends on collective identities forming around clearly differentiated positions, as well as on the possibility of choosing between real alternatives. The blurring of political frontiers between right and left, for instance, impedes the creation of democratic political identities and fuel disenchantment with political participation. This prepares the ground for various forms of populist politics articulated around nationalist, religious or ethnic issues. When the agonistic dynamic of the pluralist system is hindered because of a lack of democratic identities which one could identify, there is a risk that this will multiply

confrontations over essentialist identities and non-negotiable moral values.

Once it is acknowledged that any identity is relational and defined in terms of difference, how can we defuse the possibility of exclusion that it entails? Here again the notion of the “constitutive outside” can help us. By stressing the fact the outside is constitutive, it reveals the impossibility of drawing an absolute distinction between interior and exterior. The existence of the other becomes condition of possibility of my identity since, without the other, I could not have an identity. Therefore every identity is irremediably destabilized by its exterior and the interior appears as something always contingent. This questions every essentialist conception of identity and forecloses every attempt to conclusively define identity or objectivity. Inasmuch as objectivity always depends on an absent otherness, it is always necessarily echoed and contaminated by this otherness. Identity cannot, therefore, belong to one person alone, and no-one belongs to a single identity. We may go further, and argue that not only there are no “natural” and “original” identities, since every identity is the result of a constituting process, but that this process itself must be seen as one of permanent hybridization and nomadization. Identity is, in effect, the result of a multitude of interactions which take place inside a space the outlines of which are not clearly defined. Numerous feminist studies or researches inspired by the “post-colonial” perspective have shown that this process is always one of “overdetermination”, which establishes highly intricate links between the many forms of identity and a complex network of differences. For an appropriate definition of identity, we need to take into account both the multiplicity of discourses and the power structure which affects it, as well as the complex dynamic of complicity and resistance which underlines the practices in which this identity is implicated. Instead of seeing the different forms of identity as allegiances to a place or as a property, we ought to realize that they are what is at stake in any power struggle.

What we commonly call “cultural identity” is both the scene and the object of political struggles. The social existence of a group needs such conflict. It is one of the principal areas in which hegemony is exercised, because the definition of the cultural identity of a group, by reference to a specific system of contingent and particular social relations, plays a major role in the creation of “hegemonic nodal points”. These partially define the meaning of a “signifying chain” allowing us to control the stream of signifiers, and temporarily to control the discursive field.

Concerning the question of “national” identities — so crucial again today — the perspective based on hegemony and articulation allows us to come to grips with the idea of the national, to grasp the importance of that type of identity, instead of rejecting it in the name of anti-essentialism or as part of a defense of abstract universalism. It is very dangerous to ignore the strong libidinal investment that can be mobilized by the signifier “nation” and it is futile to hope that all national identities could be replaced by so-called “post-conventional” identities. The struggle against the exclusive type of ethnic nationalism can only be carried out by articulating another type of nationalism, a “civic” nationalism expressing allegiance to the values specific of the democratic tradition and the forms of life that are constitutive of it.

Contrary to what is sometimes asserted, I do not believe that — to take the case of Europe, for instance — the solution is the creation of a “European” identity, conceived as a homogeneous identity which could replace all other identifications and allegiances. But if we envisage it in terms of “aporia”, of a “double genitive” as suggested by Derrida in *The Other Heading*, then the notion of a European identity could be the catalyst for a promising process, not unlike what Merleau-Ponty called

“lateral universalism”, which implies that the universal lies at the very heart of specificities and differences, and that it is inscribed in respect for diversity. Indeed, if we conceive this European identity as a “difference to oneself”, then we are envisaging an identity which can accommodate otherness, which demonstrates the porosity of its frontiers and opens up towards that exterior which makes it possible. By accepting that only hybridity creates us as separate entities, it affirms and upholds the nomadic character of every identity.

I submit that, by resisting the ever present temptation to construct identity in terms of exclusion, and by recognizing that identities comprise a multiplicity of elements, and that they are dependent and interdependent, a democratic politics informed by an anti-essentialist approach can defuse the potential for violence that exists in every construction of collective identities and create the conditions for a truly “agonistic” pluralism. Such a pluralism is anchored in the recognition of the multiplicity within oneself and of the contradictory positions that this multiplicity entails. Its acceptance of the other does not merely consist in tolerating differences, but in positively celebrating them because it acknowledges that, without alterity and otherness, no identity could ever assert itself. It is also a pluralism that valorizes diversity and **dissensus**, recognizing in them the very condition of possibility of a striving democratic life.

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