

# Chapter One

## Space, Hegemony and Radical Critique

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### Introduction

What kind of radical critique is still possible in our post-political world where we are constantly told that there is no alternative to the current mode of neoliberal globalisation? To approach this question we first need to ask how critique should be envisaged. Indeed there are many different understandings of the nature of critique, and the forms that correspond to them are very diverse. Should we envisage the activity of critique in terms of judgement or in terms of practice? Is it, as it is often claimed, a self-conscious activity linked to the Enlightenment and characteristic of modernity? Besides, as Foucault has rightly noted, critique cannot be defined apart from its objects and is therefore condemned to dispersion. Centring my investigation on social criticism will 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 judgements, and others who, like Foucault, see criticism as a practice of resistance.

However, I will approach this issue in a different way. Since my aim is to scrutinise the relation between social criticism and radical politics, I have chosen to examine one of the currently most fashionable views of social criticism today, which visualises radical politics in terms of desertion and

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exodus, contrasting it with the hegemonic approach that I have been advocating in my work. I intend to bring to the fore the main differences between those approaches, which could roughly be distinguished 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 argue that the form of radical politics advocated by post-operaist thinkers like Negri and Virno is informed by a flawed understanding of the nature of space (see Massey, 2005: 174–175).<sup>1</sup> I contend that this is an understanding that does not allow them to acknowledge the ineradicable dimension of antagonism and to grasp the dimension of ‘the political’.

The work of Doreen Massey has been very important to me for thinking about politics because she really made me realise the importance of the spatial dimension in politics, something I had not been aware of previously. There are two implications of this position that I find to be particularly significant for thinking about democratic politics. First, Massey has insisted that space is a dimension of multiplicity. She has always insisted that space and multiplicity are co-constitutive. Space poses the question of how we are going to live together. This is a crucial question, of course, for democratic politics. Second is the idea that space is the product of relations and practices and that we need to acknowledge our co-constitutive interrelatedness, and that implies a spatiality. I think this is extremely important. So, if we are going to think about how we are going to live together there is necessarily a dimension of spatiality; this is something that many political theorists do not fully realise. In this chapter I use these insights to engage with the current state of radical politics.

## **Critique as Withdrawal From**

The model of social criticism and radical politics put forward by Michel Hardt and Antonio Negri in their books *Empire*, *Multitude* and *Commonwealth* calls for a total break with modernity and the elaboration of a postmodern approach. Such a break, they say, is required because of the crucial transformations undergone by our societies since the last decades of the twentieth century. According to them, those changes, which are the consequences of the process of globalisation and transformations in the work process brought about by workers’ struggles, can be broadly summarised 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 Hardt and Negri call ‘Empire’, has replaced the stage of imperialism, which 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 deterritorialised apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm with open, expanding frontiers.

- 2 This transformation corresponds to the transformation of the capitalist mode of production in which the role of industrial factory labour has been reduced and priority given to communicative, cooperative and affective labour. In the postmodernisation 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' (Foucault) to a 'society of control' (Deleuze) characterised 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 apparatus that produce and regulate customs, habits and productive practices, with the help of disciplinary institutions like prisons, factories, asylums, hospitals, schools and so forth. 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 interiorised through mechanisms that directly organise 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 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 postmodernity and biopolitical production labour power has become increasingly collective and social and a new term is needed to refer to this collective worker: the 'Multitude'. The Multitude, say Hardt and Negri, called Empire into being and they present the construction of Empire as a response to the various machines of power and the struggles of the Multitude. They claim that the passage to Empire opens new possibilities for the liberation of the Multitude. According to them, globalisation, in so far as it operates a real deterritorialisation 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 organisation of the global flows of exchange and globalisation, so as to reorganise 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 precarisation 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 precarisation. So, instead of seeing the generalisation of immaterial labour as a type of 'spontaneous communism' like Hardt and Negri, Virno sees 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 public character 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 organised 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 is at stake is a radical disobedience which puts in question the state's very faculty of command.

With respect to the question of how to conceive the democracy of the multitude, there is a basic agreement among Hardt/Negri and Virno. 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. For them, the problem with the notion of the people is that it is represented in 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-organising 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. They state that the democracy of the Multitude cannot be visualised in terms of a sovereign authority that is representative of the people, and they call for new forms of democracy which are non-representative. 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 recognise 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.

As we can see, according to this model, the activity of critique corresponds to a form of negation which consists in withdrawal from existing institutions. At the core of the agreement among the theorists of the Multitude we find a celebration of the process of 'deterritorialisation' which is presented as providing the conditions for the disappearance of states and the emergence of an increasingly 'smooth' democratic world beyond sovereignty and the constraints of state power. It is for this reason that they want the Multitude to liberate itself from all forms of belonging and that they denounce local and regional attachments as obstacles to the globalised absolute democracy that they are advocating.

In my view, one of the main problems with this approach comes from the inadequate conception of spatiality that informs their view of globalisation, which they claim is leading to the establishment of a 'smooth' space. This idea needs to be challenged because it has direct consequences for their mistaken conception of politics. To criticise such a flawed approach, the work of Doreen Massey is of great relevance. By bringing to the fore the fact that space is always striated because it is a product of relations and struggles, her concept of 'geometries of power' highlights the way in which power plays a central role in the construction of spatialised social practices (Massey, 1993a). She argues that we need a local politics that thinks beyond the local, acknowledging that the local is globally produced and the global locally produced (Massey, 1991b, 2007). This helps us to grasp the importance of

the spatial dimension in politics and to envisage a politics of place aiming at both defending and challenging the nature of the local. Contrary to those who think only in terms of the global and dismiss local and regional attachments, Massey's approach allows us to scrutinise the role of the local in the construction of wider power geometries, thereby opening new avenues for political engagement and challenging the strategy of exodus and desertion advocated by authors like Hardt, Negri and Virno.

## **Critique as Hegemonic Engagement With**

Before presenting my own view about the form of social criticism best suited to radical politics today, I would like to state that I recognise the necessity of taking account of the crucial transformations in the mode of regulation of capitalism brought about by the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. I agree with the importance of not seeing those transformations as the mere consequence of technological progress and of emphasising their political dimension. I consider, however, that the dynamics of this transition are 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* (2001 [1985]), written jointly with Ernesto Laclau. What I want to stress is that many factors have contributed to this transition and that it is necessary to recognise its complex nature. My problem with the operaist and post-operaist view is that, by putting an almost exclusive accent on the workers' struggles, they tend to see this transition as if it was driven by one single logic: workers' resistance to the process of exploitation forcing the capitalists to reorganise the process of production and to move to post-Fordism with its centrality of immaterial labour. In their view, capitalism can only be reactive and they refuse to accept the creative role played both by capital and by labour. What they deny is, in fact, the role played in this transition by the hegemonic struggle.

According to the approach that I am advocating, the two key concepts for addressing 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 recognising the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and envisaging society as the product of a series of practices whose aim is to establish order in a context of contingency. The practices of articulation, through which a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions fixed, 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' struggles) is at work in the evolution of the labour process, and acknowledging the proactive 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 developed in the 1960s, 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 the process of discursive rearticulation of existing discourses and practices, allowing us to visualise 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 neutralisation' 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 neutralises 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 longer 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, or for that matter in 'deserting' them. The second moment, the moment of rearticulation, is crucial. Otherwise we will be faced with a chaotic situation

of pure dissemination, leaving the door open for attempts at rearticulation 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 by a moment of 're-identification', and that the critique and disarticulation of the existing hegemony goes 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 the dominant 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. For 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 language 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 rearticulation of new and old elements into a different configuration of power.

The hegemonic strategy of 'war of position' that I am advocating is clearly informed by a conception of space which, like the one advocated by Massey, acknowledges its dimension of multiplicity (see Massey, 2005). By asserting that space and multiplicity are co-constitutive and that our constitutive interrelatedness implies spatiality, Massey's conception allows us to scrutinise the nature of spatiality and to see it as a field of political engagement. Her notion of 'power-geometries' brings to the fore the spatial character of the hegemonic articulations which constitute the nodal points around which a given hegemony is established. The globalised space appears as always striated, with a diversity of sites where relations of power are articulated in specific local, regional and national configurations. This reveals the crucial spatial dimension of the strategy of 'war of position' which has to take place in many different social spaces. Indeed, the multiplicity of nodal points which configure different geometries of power call for a variety of strategies and the struggle cannot simply be envisaged at the global level or in terms of desertion.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to realise that, besides relying on different conceptions of spatiality, the disagreements between the two approaches that I have



presented also 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, recognises that antagonism is irreducible and that, as a consequence, social objectivity can never be fully constituted. Therefore, a fully inclusive consensus or an ‘absolute democracy’ is never available. In all its versions the problem with this immanentist view is its incapacity to give account of the role of radical negativity, that is, antagonism. No doubt, 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 society as a homogeneous space because this is incompatible with the recognition of radical negativity. 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.

In fact, the strategy of exodus can be seen as 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 longer the proletariat but the Multitude that is the privileged political subject; however, 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.

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 totalisation of society, we have put into question the very possibility of such a reconciled society. To acknowledge the ineradicability of antagonism implies recognising that every form of order is necessarily a spatialised hegemonic one, that it constitutes a ‘geometry of power’, to use Massey’s vocabulary. Heterogeneity can never be eliminated and antagonistic heterogeneity points to the limits of constitution of social objectivity. As far as politics is concerned, this points to 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, as I have argued, 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 exclusively as 'acting in concert' leads to erasing the ontological dimension of antagonism (which I have proposed calling '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 with the objective of disarticulating/rearticulating its constitutive elements. It can never be merely oppositional or conceived as desertion because it aims at rearticulating 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. This 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 because it already has something in common: the general intellect.

What is at stake is the creation of a 'we', a 'People', and this requires the determination of a 'they'. Virno's rejection (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 is totally misplaced when directed to the construction of the People through a chain of equivalence. As we have repeatedly emphasised, in this case we are dealing with a form of unity that respects diversity and does not eliminate differences, otherwise it would not be a relation of equivalence but a simple 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 the reason why the construction of a 'People' requires defining an adversary. Such an adversary cannot be defined in broad general terms like 'Empire' or subsumed under an homogeneous label such as '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, 1971) that needs to be launched in a multiplicity of sites. This can only be done by establishing links between social movements, political parties and trade unions, as Doreen Massey's own political interventions have strived to do. To create, through the construction of a chain of equivalence, a 'collective will' aiming at the transformation of a

wide range of institutions so as to establish new geometries of power is, in my view, the kind of critique suited to a radical politics.

## Note

- 1 The terms 'operaismo' and 'post-operaismo' are terms used to refer to the autonomous workers' struggles of the 1970s, particularly those in Italy with which Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno were strongly associated. They have been critiqued for their exclusive accent on workers' struggles.