The Sensible Nationalism. Art and Nations as Creative Agencies of History

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THE SENSIBLE NATIONALISM.
ART AND NATIONS AS CREATIVE AGENCIES OF HISTORY

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Abstract

This paper is approaching the problematics discussed around the concept of national identity in our post-political times, investigating how contemporary art practices produce meaning inside this theoretical structure based on argumentative positions concerning the indeterminate, fragmented, and ambiguous constitution of any national identity, the imaginative nature of a community − assuming for itself a certain national identity − or the intrinsic, continuous and dynamic process of adopting a specific national identity. Describing nationalism as a mode of sensibility, or as a creative agency that constitutes history, this paper identifies similarities between art and nationalism, as forms of cultural representation which generate cultural discourse and produce identity narratives. Identifying a shift in approaching nationalism, from a specific ideological narrative about the nation, to an imaginative narrative about nations as cultural artefacts, this paper assembles different analytical perspective over nationalism − and its disseminated concepts as: identity, community, culture, discourse – with certain artistic practices exploring those concepts, as the photomontages of Vivian Sundaram, or the video work of Milica Tomić. Furthermore, this paper is inscribing the contemporary understanding of nationalism within the context of post-politics, investigating how concepts – as the particular and the Universal, the empty space, the constitutive difference – relate to the question of nationalism, and how, in our post-political societies, critical artistic practice – favouring a dissensual order – could regenerate proper politics, annihilating the consensual order imposed by the technocratic administrative regime that substitutes the political regime.

Keywords: *sensible nationalism, national identity, national narratives, imaginative communities, invented traditions, post-politics, post-ideological consensus, post-democratic, politics of dissensus, urban government.*

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There are many views around the concept of nationalism, since its thematization is expanding towards an interdisciplinary research, connecting methods of analysis and documentations processes from a wide field of disciplines: political studies, cultural studies, art studies, postcolonial studies, gender studies. Art theory's approaches to nationalism are overpassing the presumed boundaries between art and politics, or between arts and the constitution of identity or the configuration of the public sphere. Instead, the concept of sensible nationalism is proposed as the embedment of nationalism in arts, while the relation between arts and politics is endogenously suppressed, since any relation supposes a certain distance and a separate existence. Given that art and politics are not separately constituted, as different fields of knowledge in a supposedly interaction, we can attest their entanglement, affirming that "there is an aesthetic dimension in the political, as well as there is a political dimension in art." (Mouffe 2008, 11)

If we consider nationalism a phenomenon of recent historical origin − as Ernest Gellner states, acknowledging that our current understanding of nationalism, as a cultural-political construct, cannot be traced back before the eighteen centuries even if, in pre-modern times, we can talk about ethnic, linguistic or political communities similarly constituted − we can dismiss current nationalist discourses that states the primordial origin of their nation. Also, the well emphasised argument of a pre-existing linguistic structure which offers a sense of continuity, connecting past communities with recent ones, could be contested by the fact that language underwent a cultural transformation, as part of the extensive structural changes, that had remodelled any society in its every aspect: cultural, economic, political.

Thus, Gellner describes nationalism as "the dissemination of the national ideologies that can only occur in modern, mass societies" (Edensor 2002, 2), disregarding its continuity or pre-existing formations sustained by other thinkers, as Antony Smith who believes that nations are founded on pre-existing ethnic communities, or Geoffrey Cubitt, who identifies nationalism precisely in this complex and dynamic linguistic structure that underwent multiple changes throughout history, constituting "a conceptual language [...] proved adaptable to the needs of both the imperial aggression and the anti-imperial resistance,

both of economic traditionalism and the capitalist progress, both of political right and political left, both of the expansionist state and of its critics" (Cubitt 1998, 2). This perspective, places nationalism beyond political matters with an interest towards consolidating national relations or attaining national interests, since indifferently of the political changes, their agendas, or their body of ideas, nationalism remains "a mode of sensibility, projected and elaborated across a wide range of cultural fields" (Cubitt 19983).

This is how the concept of sensible nationalism is born, in a context in which many theoreticians affirm themselves against the existent political definitions of nationalism, criticizing them from being elitist and bureaucratic, and offering as an alternative a cultural perspective over nationalism. John Hutchinson and Guibernau are describing this cultural nationalist as "moral innovators", or "moral regenerators" since they take care of a historical construct "embodied in myths, symbols and culture" (Hutchinson and Guibernau 2001, 76). Contesting Ernest Gellner's insistence on the modernity of nations, Hutchinson brings forward Cubitt's metaphor which describes nations as projected sensibilities, personifying nations as creative agencies that constitute history. This brings us closer to a dominant approach over the theorization of nations as imaginative constructs. Even though it is difficult to accurately dissociate between the mental projections constructed in the mind of every member of the "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006) and the actual social reality, nation's existence is maintained through the power of discourse and imagination:

> "Like many other social formations, nations exist to the extent that discourse and behaviour and institutional structures are organised around the assumption of their existence." (Cubitt 1998, 3)

In other words, nations are sustained by our discursive implication and our imaginative labour, while the sensible nationalism is a reflection of our creative implication toward the nation. This idea underlines certain similarities between art and nations, since art processes are constituted primarily by imaginative labour, and art products are framed by discursive practices. To the extent of this argument we can

make analogies between institutional structures, inside the art filed, which are legitimised through discursive and imaginative processes, and institutional structures organised around the assumption of the existence of nations, which share the same imaginative practices and discursive methods. Furthermore, art similarly to nationalism, constitutes "a mode of sensibility" and it is embodied in culture. Through its creative implication art can support this process of imaginative labour that maintain the life of sensible nationalism, since "the power of creativity is to elicit agitation movement, to transform energy into labor" (Holmes 2004, 103) and it can "offer a change for society to collectively reflect on the imaginary figures it depends upon for its very consistency, its self-understanding" (Holmes 2004, 102).

This paradigm represents a shift in the understanding of nations. If initially, approaches over nationalism were concern about specific ideologies, revealing national policies and exposing concrete details about nationalist movement, this new approach on sensible nationalism considers nationalism as result of an imaginative labour, a creative process similar to the artistic practice which "constructs an imaginative field onto which different sets of concern may be projected, and upon which connection may be forged between different aspects of social political and cultural experience" (Cubitt 1998, 1). As a result, the sensible nationalism is constituted as a cultural diagramming process that connects key elements of culture, and it's configured identity represents a process of becoming, characterized by a cultural dynamism that remains permanently open to different reconstruction, since all the nation's

> "(e)xistence is ontologically unstable, however institutionalised they become, and however well established the symbolism that denotes them, nations [and their inscribed identities] remain elusive and indeterminate, perpetually open to context, to elaboration and to imaginative reconstruction." (Cubitt 1998, 3)

This perspective over the national identity as a culturally dynamic process is shared by the artist Vivian Sundaram in his series of photomontages *Re-take of Amrita,* 2001. Investigating the problematics of memory, commemoration and nationalism, Sundaram constructed an "image as a metaphor for what Amrita [Sher-Gil, a well-known Indian

artist, and his aunt] would come to represent for art and for India: a nationalist image, European hybridity, and the interchange between desire and sorrow" (Phillips 2002, 41). The work, including 38 digital photomontages, describes precisely this indeterminate constitution of the national identity, investigating the dynamics of cultural reconstruction in his family genealogy. Giving that the Sundaram family has embodied throughout time four different nationalities − as citizens of Hungary, Pakistan, India and France, establishing "a family whose intellectual and artistic endeavours crossed continents, languages, philosophies and cultures" (Meskimmon 2011, 21) – we can attest the dynamic configuration of their national identity, constituted trough cultural diagramming process, that interconnects elements of culture from all the nations they inscribe themselves in.

In order to understand the concept of national identity as a dynamic process of becoming, we should reflect towards the concept of self-identity, its mechanisms of transformation and its socio-cultural dynamics. Identity, a concept that connects the inside and the outside, the public and the personal, describes a person's affiliation to a certain culturally codified community, inscribing the individual into the cultural world that he inhabits. Making distinctions between the Enlightenment subject and the post-modern subject, Hall noticed how the concept of identity changes, from a function that stabilizes both, subjects and their cultural worlds, "making [them both] reciprocally more unified and predictable [to a..] moveable feast" (Hall 1996, 598), a fragmented "process [and not..] a complete production" (Hall 2003, 222), a variable structure which is transformed continuously, making the identification process − through which we place ourselves into a specific cultural context – flexible, adjustable and limitless. As a result, this shifting process of identity deprives the post-modern subject of the possibility of establishing a coherent self, and the tendency to configure a consistent, unified and coherent identity is maintained by constructing a comforting narrative of the self.

This approach on identity is also explored in the above-mentioned series of photomontages *Re-take of Amrita.* In one of the photos, a collage of three mirror reflected images are suggesting the fragmented process of configuring Sundaram's identity. One of the images reflected in the

mirror presents Sundaram as a child, the other image exposes Sundaram's "grandmother as a young woman […], and in the final reflection, his aunt Amrita looks into two mirror images of herself, dressed to reflect her dual heritage: Indian and Hungarian" (Phillips 2002, 41). Another photomontage presents a juxtaposition of two images, one representing Amrita's self-portrait in her painting *The Bride's Toilet*, 1937, and the other, a photographical image of Amrita Sher-Gil at the Lake Balaton, in 1938. Thus, Sundaram exemplifies Hall's theory about the fragmented constitution of the identity, disconnecting Amrita from herself, exposing her alter ego, and constituting alternatives images describing her identity: as woman or as an artist, as an European female, or as an Oriental woman: "acting out the paradox of the oriental subject in the body of a woman designated as Eurasian – a hybrid body of unusual beauty [..whom] with her intelligent masquerade as the oriental/modern/native woman, gave to this emerging modernism a reflexive turn" (Kapur 2000, 302). Those alternating representations of Amrita's identity are unified and integrated in a coherent self through the narratives that Sundaram discovers about the history of his family. If we fallow the complete narration of Amrita's past − how she was born in Hungary, and when she was nine years old her family emigrated to India − we start to understand why Sundaram choses to represent her in this way, and to envision a coherent narration of Amrita's self-identity.

For Antony Giddens, this capacity of composing a coherent narration of the self is a confirmation of adequate self-identity process. Therefore, the identity is an undefined project more than a finite product, and it relies on our ability to represent ourselves creatively, in an autobiographical manner that coherently integrates past events and future projections of ourselves (Giddens, 1991). For Hall, this perspective over the identity as a process constituted mostly on the inside then on the outside, as a fantasy construct, problematizes the very "authority and authenticity to which the term cultural identity lays claim" (Hall 2003, 222). This authority claimed by the cultural identity is derived from its representation as a predetermined frame − which is global, stable and unchanging, reuniting individuals under the same shared cultural codes. Nonetheless, the cultural identity undertakes the same process of transformation; it is not a given fact which transcends

history, it is not deeply anchored in the narratives of the past, but it is a continuously developing process, in a paradigm that implies historical, cultural and political relations.

This dynamic representation of the cultural identity could be also applied to a particular cultural identity, which represent the object of interest in this article: the national identity. Although some conservative approaches consider national identification as a necessity, describing it as a condition for the constitution of the individual as an autonomous being, this paper is concerned with the transformative capacity of the national identity, considering that the nationality is not inscribed in ourselves when we are born, but reader it develops trough time, according to our sensibility and to our integration in a particular system of cultural representation. Thus, the national identity has the capacity to produce cultural discourse, to constitute identity narratives and to determine cultural representation, although the individual is ultimately responsible for maintaining its symbolic power. In other words, national culture is generating identity by producing certain narratives to which the individual can identify itself.

As we argued before, referring to the self-identity constructing process – which is based on our ability to fabricate a coherent narrative about ourselves – the constitution of our national identity is a similar – intrinsic – process, based on our capacity to integrate ourselves in the pre-existing narrative of our nation, to connect our memories to our national past, and to construct images related to our context. In other words, the national identity is "an imagined community" (Anderson 2006, 6) – a community constituted socially, relationally, but not interactionally since the individuals, although they perceive themselves as members of community, they do not interact directly. Thus, the national identity is a product of our collective imaginary, and it's constituted as an "imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 2006, 49). The limitations of the community are also imagined, since the individuals have a concrete perception over the community border, referring a finite number of members, although – considering the elasticity of any borders –, it is impossible to establish precisely the number of persons existing in the imagined community.

The Slovene art group Neue Slowenische Kunst, or NSK, explores this idea of a nation constituted creatively as an imagined community. Their project *The State in Time*, realised in 1991, envisions the possibility of reconfiguring and expanding their art organization's structure in a manner that resembles the structure of the Yugoslavian National State. As a product of a collective imaginary, the NSK National State "denies the categories of fixed territories, the principle of national borders, and advocates the law of transnationality" (Jacobi 2010), integrating citizens from all over the world, disregarding their differences of race, nationality or sex. The beneficiaries of the right to citizenship need to accomplish two conditions: to have the ability of imagining "a spiritual, virtual State" (Jacobi 2010), projecting themselves as members of this indefinite structure constituted by members who do not have the possibility of interaction, and to use creatively the NSK passport.

Influenced by the political context of the Federal Yugoslav State which had collapsed, as a result of a series of political upheavals and conflicts during the early 1990s, this project artistically transforms the political imaginary of a society in need to reflect towards such social organization forms in order to "exorcize the totalitarian state, to replay the traumatic history [...] so as to recover their autonomy" (Holmes 2004, 109). This community, constituted under the name of NSK National State "or as they call themselves: a constructive organization, or what I might call them: the experimental expressive machines of the multitudes [is supported by...]" "an imaginary of active critical emancipation, conveyed by sophisticated strategies and techniques of distribution" (Holmes 2004, 110). Its formation recalls Paul Virno's notion of a non-state public sphere: a political community that subversively imagines alternatives to "the power of the Administation, constituting an alliance between general intellect and political Action, and a movement toward the public sphere of Intellect" (Virno 1996, 189).

In essence, any imagined community − constituted whether to distort an existing power, or to generate an alternative for the constitution of the public sphere, or in the case of Yugoslavia, to destitute a "bureaucratic disciplinary state which bore the double heritage of Nazism and Stalinism" (Holmes 2004, 109) − is configured where there is a void, a lack in its political constitution that requires a

substitute. Ernst Geller considers that nationalism was conceived as a substitute for the ideological void left by the disappearance of the agrarian society, affirming that "nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist" (Gellner 1964, 169). Elie Kedourie has a more radical position considering that nationalism is "a doctrine invented in Europe, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, […stating] that humanity is naturally divided into nations; that nations are known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate type of government is national self-government" (Kedourie 1993, 9). In this paradigm, Anderson intervenes by stating that the word "invented" has negative connotation linked to falsity and fabrication, while the word "imagined" has a positive connotation linked to creation, and thus, communities are to be "distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson 2006, 49).

Thus, Anderson accepts that the individual is constructing a personal image over the community − which it may not accurately, but sensibly represent the society, as a whole −, and this fictional product could not be considered false or fraudulent since it functions as an identity symbol. In other words, Anderson understands nationalism as a cultural artefact, considering that imagination is the constitutive force that facilitate de production of such artefacts. Analyzing the historical circumstances in which those cultural artefacts were created, Anderson values the importance of the national narratives, as an object of understanding the modular character of all the nations – since every nation is constituted as part of a functioning whole, and no single nation could exist outside the other nations. In this respect, Homi K. Bhabha problematize the totalization of the national culture, acknowledging that the spread of written culture in modern Europe has supported the constitution of a political imagined community, attesting that narration is the instrument of a "textual dissemination that could configure new field of signification and symbols associated with the national life" (1990, 3).

The dynamic relation constituted between those two concepts: nation and narration, was the object of study for many theoreticians. For Homi K. Bhabha, the understanding of nation through narration implies the acceptance of an allegorical historicization, or a metaphorical

perspective over the national constitution, since both nations and narrations are losing their "origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye" (3). Thus, the historical perception over the nation is constituted narratively, sensibly and metaphorically in accordance to the narrative intentionality, which could be influenced by the nationalist tendencies of historicizing, or could adopt a specific nationalist narcissism, that could determine an ambivalent understanding of a nation history. The ambivalence of the historicization process is constituted by the discrepancy between the narrative intentionality – constituted within a nationalist or an anti-nationalist discourse –, and the historical reality of the social facts.

This narrative intentionality, as an expression of the narrator's subjectivity is also present in the dissemination of the historical realities. The ideological metaphors, the textual encipher and the discursive subjectivity are part of the narrative stratagems used to preserve the identity of the narration which − in the case of the national narratives − prevails upon the identity of the nation. For Mieke Bal, the narration is understood as the act of giving a specific voice to a narrator, and every narrated fact – whether it has a national significance or not – is taking place in a hypothetical time in which the real status of the historical events is not revealed, in order to support the internal logic of the narration (Bal 2009). Thus, the narration is constituted as a self-legitimising process which, similarly to the process of configuring a national identity, is searching to preserve a certain exoticism, and is struggling for its cultural independence. Both nations and narrations are creating forms of cultural resistance over the transformative powers which are constantly searching to redefine their cultural identity. Endorsing the cultural differentiation, both nations and narration are constituted as ambivalent spaces, fighting against the process of cultural hybridization, and opposing to any hegemonic norms of culture.

This analogies between nations and narrations lead us to the conclusion that national identity is a discourse – a voice that speak for ourselves, a position which we can identify ourselves with. This discourse is implementing certain discursive stratagems through which it can directly speak to any members of this imagined community – that is the nation. First, this discourse should connect past narratives with the

actual events of the present, it should identify key elements that linked the past with the present, offering a sense of continuity; it should refer to national symbols, and it should recreate images, scenarios, or stories that represent the national identity. The emphasis should be on the origins of the nation, its perpetuity and its timelessness. It is important that the discourse which legitimise the national identity relates to tradition and in this respect, Hobsbawm and Ranger introduce another discursive strategy: the invention of tradition. This convention, based on the repetition of certain national values, implies "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies a continuity with the past" (1983, 1).

Invented traditions occur mostly when a society is transgressing a rapid transformation, which invalidates the old pattern of tradition, while the cultural institutions that should embrace the possibility of constituting new traditions are not so flexible and couldn't adapt to the new rhythm of the social change. Invented traditions need a flexibility of the minds that coexist in the imagined community, but also of a historical past into which the new tradition is inserted. Thus, the historical past is elasticized and even if there is a reference to a concrete fact in the historic past, "the peculiarity of invented traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious" (Hobsbawm, 1983, 2). This factitious side of history is masked by fictional facts implemented through repetition as memories of the past. As a consequence of this fictional process, invented traditions inevitably change the course of the history creating "confusions and disasters of history intelligible, converting disarray into community and disasters into triumphs" (Hall 2003, 614).

Concerning art and its practices, the same cultural, economic and political dislocation that produced a destabilization of the society, causing its accelerate transformation, also shaped the artistic approach towards traditions. In his article *On Creating a Usable Past*, published in 1918, Van Wyck Brooks, noticed that with the arrival of the twentieth century, the increasingly mechanized and commercialized society with "its pioneer migrations and aggressive commercialism had destroyed any native traditions and prevented the growth of an organic community upon which [...] artists could build a national culture" (as

cited in V. Grieve 2009 38). However, since our "past is an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals" (Brooks 1918, 337) artist have the liberty to invent new realities, constructing new traditions to be explored in their work, and changing the history according to their imaginative thinking.

Thus, whether in the artistic processes, in the historicization methods, or in the socio-political constitution of the community, fiction find its indispensable role. In other words, fiction is what constitutes communities, histories and traditions − therefore, he national identity is a fictional concept founded on series of myths: stories "which locates the origin of the nation, the people, and their national character so early that they are lost in the mists of, not real, but mythic time" (Hall 2003, 614). Usually, the constructed fact has more power than the original story, and it is able to persist in the collective memory. Thus, the tendency to restore past identities becomes an ambiguous process since every constituted identity is linked to a past, fabricated in the present. For Hall, the restoration of the past is "a regressive and anachronistic element in the national cultural story [which] conceals a struggle to mobilize the people to purify their ranks, and to expel the others who threaten their identity" (615). Citing from Immanuel Wallerstein's book *The Politics of the World Economy*, published in 1984, Hall takes Eastern Europe as an example, noticing the intention of certain eastern regions to break away from the old Soviet Union and to rethink their ethic identities based on stories of mythic origins and racial purity, in order to associate with the richer western nations, which also ambiguously express "a desire for assimilation into the universal, and simultaneously for adhering to the particular, the reinvention of differences. Indeed, it is a universalism through particularism and particularism through universalism" (as cited in Hall 2003, 615).

This constitutive ambiguity is present in Laclau's rethinking of the relation between particularism and universalism. In his dialogue with Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek, Laclau affirms that "the very notion of particularity presupposes that of totality, even total separation cannot escape the fact that separation is still a type of relation between entities" (Laclau 2000, 58). Furthermore, in his essay *Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity*, he attests that the universality exists in

particularity, and every identification process contains "a constitutive lack, that is, as far as [the] differential identity has failed in its process of constitution" (Laclau 1992, 89). This constitutive lack is what Žižek identifies as the empty principle of the Universal. In his article *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek describes the universality as an empty structure which is "always-already filled in, that is, hegemonized by some contingent, particular content that acts as its stand-in − in short, each Universal is the battleground on which the multitude of particular contents fight for hegemony" (Žižek 1999, 100-101). Thus, the Universal exists in the particular, as well as the particular exist in the Universal.

If we are to apply this theory to the process of constituting an identity, in our case a national identity, we could conclude that any particular identity is Universal as long as its process of constitution is incomplete. When confronted to a constitutive lack, the national identity becomes Universal. This could only happen if we think of the national identity in terms of a cultural process that is continuously transforming, flexible and unlimited, allowing the emergence of the Universal from its particular structure. The fundamental openness of the national identity is the constitutive frame of the Universal, but only if the individual knows the profoundness of its own national particularity, which can be, in itself, a pluralized structure, he could, then, understand the ambiguity of the Universal. The individual identification, it is not necessarily linked to interpellation, in the Althusserian terms, but it could be constituted as a process of identity ambiguity in a structure in which the social agents are establishing certain positions through the process of identification and integration of every actor into a specific field inside the structure. For Laclau, every constitutive lack within this structure requires

> "(n)ot only to have subject position within the structure, but also the subject, as an attempt to fill these structural gaps. That is why we do not have just identities, but rather identification; if identification is required, however, there is going to be a basic ambiguity at the heart of all identity." (Laclau 2000, 58)

Following this paradigm of thinking, the Slovak artist Milica Tomić explores this continuous and flexible process of national identification, at a discursive and performative level. In her video work

entitled *I am*, Milica Tomić adopts her national identity as a nominal category, assuming different identities in a succession of ambivalent affirmations: I am Milica Tomić and I am Dutch, I am Milica Tomić and I am Italian, I am Milica Tomić and I am Slovak, I am Milica Tomić and I am Czech, I am Milica Tomić and I am Catalan, and so on. Thus, the artist explores the ambiguous nature of the individual identification, attesting the fundamental openness which describes the process of constituting a national identity. Exposing the inherent diversity of her subjectivity, Milica Tomić expresses the constitutive lack of every identification process, which universalizes her particular identity. Furthermore, her declarations are made from a place that constitutes the empty space of the Universal, which at a visual level is depicted as a profoundly black background. The Universal immerses from her particular constitution of the national identity as "an incomplete horizon of its constitution" (59), and this constitutive lack, proper to the national identification process, is what determines her perpetually incomplete horizon of identity.

In this sense, Laclau's intention is to prove that every identification process is open-ended, it is not completely determined, but rather ambiguous; and structurally, every identity has a certain constitutive incompleteness of its content. The variables involved in this incompleteness are constituting the differential aspect of any identity, or as Judith Butler puts it: "an identity is constituted through its difference from a limitless set of other identities" (Butler 2000, 31). But, in relation to the Universal, any identity should recognize its differential constitution, admitting the existing field of differentiability in which are limitless identities are emerged. A particular identity may fail to recognize the global sphere, universalizing its own structure, but it will be impossible to elevate its particular content to a global content even if the universality is "an empty space and there is no a priori reason for it not to be filled by any content" (Laclau 1996, 60). The condition of the Universal is an ineradicable emptiness, and its limitless, its constitutional difference, and its unconditional structure, are legitimated by the failure of any particular structure to universalize its local meaning.

Certain analogies could be identified between Laclau's acceptance of the universality and Hall's perspective over the national identity.

First, the national identity shares the logics of the Universal by allowing a constitutive incompleteness of its configuration, since the national identity is not determined, a priori, is not inscribed into our particular structure when we are born, but it's a continuous process which implies a certain emptiness that allows its transformability. Secondly, the national identity is not a given fact that persists as a stable reference point throughout the history, is not a cultural endowment waiting to be discovered, and articulated, but is a limitless condition; and just like the Universal, its paradoxical completion rest in its constitutive lack.

Explaining its abstract theory of the universal in social terms, Laclau imagines a society according to the principles of the Universal in which the "experience of a lack, of an absence of fullness in social relations, transforms the [social] order into the signifier of an absent fullness" (Laclau 1996, 60), while the political agents that are trying to fill the empty place are experiencing a split in their identity, a constitutive difference, which is the fundamental condition for the existence of the society. Without these differences, there will be no political interaction and no political dissensions, which will cause the end of the proper politics. Thus, Laclau identifies the dissension as a common condition to all the politicization processes, which in its constitutive difference will experience its failure in bringing the fullness of the society by representing the Universal; and this failure, although it cannot be considered as "the aim of politics, it does produce a value − indeed, the value of universality that no politics can do without." (Laclau 1996, 51)

For Laclau, every political implication nurtures a veiled desire towards the ultimate political goal: the total emancipation from any power structures. But this complete emancipation should not be attained since it will ultimately invalidate power, in its essence. Slavoj Žižek makes an analogy between Laclau's argument and the Kantian position about the human imperfection. In his work, *The Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant states that the human limitation is the "positive condition of the liberty" – since our cognitive capacity needs to be limited, in order to make as free and responsible agents. If there was a possibility to overcome those limitations, it will determine the end freedom, and the transformation of all humans into lifeless automatons. Thus, for Laclau,

a complete emancipation from power is not possible because the emancipation, in itself, is contaminated by power, and if it could be possible, it will cause the death of any liberty by annihilating the possibility of any dissensual positions.

This argument is shared by other post-political thinkers, as Jacques Rancière or Slavoj Žižek for whom the politics could exist only in a dissensual context, and any political doctrine instituting a post-ideological consensus is determining the withdrawal of the politics from the social field and its absorption by the systems of social administration: the public administration and the police. In other words, the death of the proper politics is made by consensual agreement between the political agents, as a result of a conduct better known as "*polic(y)ing*" (Swyngedouw 2010) then politicizing. This articulation of the governmental field by consensual strategies represents the apocalyptic ground-zero of politics. This moment signalises the beginning of a post-democratic society in which the democratic life, with its dissident positions, is reduced to a "management of local consequences of global economic necessity" (Rancière 2004, 4). Thus, the formal democracy, inconspicuously determined by liberal economic strategies, is promoting consensual agreement as its supreme democratic value, establishing a common condition for both left-wing and right-wing politics.

The constitutive lack, inherent to the politics of consensus is the democracy in itself. Although, the consensus is considered a supreme value of democracy, its strategy of unifying the dialectical position between the right and the left, of obliterating all contra-arguments and establishing a new political order − based on a camouflaged agreement over the economical principals − is precisely what constitutes the death of the democracy. The political government, maintained to preserve an appearance of a democratic society is dominated by the urban government − a structure operating beyond the State − which annihilates the governmental power and institutes an interdependent relation between the political domain and the economical field. Thus, the political power is reconfigured as a diagrammatical structure of power relation that connects all the new centers of power instituted: from international corporation, to transnational economic agencies, elitist organizations or private institution.

The strategies applied are made to expand the limits of democracy, integrating agents of decision from the administrational field, rather than from the political field, and constituting a governmental innovation which gives the power to the technocracy. For Žižek, the technocracy's role is to maintain the universal consensus since

> "(t)he conflict of global ideological visions, embodied in different parties which compete for power, is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats: economists, public opinion specialists, and liberal multiculturalists; via the process of negotiation of interests." (Žižek 1999, 198)

Thus, the actors of the private economic sector have a very important role in the constitution of the politics, while the political power is replaced by the institutional power and its administration. The expansion of the governmental sphere, in a circumstance where the political space is tightening or even supressing itself, requires the rethinking of the society as an urban utopia which contest the consensual order established.

Critical artistic practices have the resources to contest and subvert the dominant hegemony of the Administration, and to envision an utopian scenario of a new political configuration because they have "the power of visualizing that which is repressed and destroyed by the consensus of post-political democracy" (Mouffe 2008, 11). Imagining possible socio-political alternatives, artists like Thomas Hirschhorn in his sculptural installations with participatory and collaborative implications, as the Bataille Monument, Jeremy Deller with his video re-enactment of the Battle of Orgreaves, or Antony Gormley vast sculptural installation Asian Field, are constituting utopian experiments that reconfigures the structures of societies built around the exaggeration of neoliberal values, the replacement of a democratic government with a management of economic necessity and the confidence in the consensual order maintained through the technocracy.

There are many forms of critical art that engage with the problematics of identity, or the constitution of the political space and social sphere. To name just a few: Braco Dimitrijević investigates the mechanisms through which the power is inscribed in the individual,

Barbara Kruger and Hans Haacke are approaching critically the political reality through their artistic practices, Daniel Joseph Martinez explores the problems of the immigrants and social minorities in his works, while Kryzstof Wodiczko and Santiago Sierra are concerned about the exploitation of the workers, the homeless people and the illegal workers. These artistic practices are "aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony" (Mouffe 2008, 11) and this is precisely what institutes the dissensual order that saves the proper politics.

In closing this article, I would like to present an utopian scenario, imagined in accordance to both, socio-politic and artistic problematizations discussed above, of a new political structure configured to replace the post-political consensual order. A new political order should start from the inside, from identifying a possible interstice of the accrual post-political order, an empty space in which the proper politics could be reinstated. As Swyngedouw describes, the post-political order transforms the social space, from a place of political dissensions – "the polis, conceived in the idealized Greek sense as the site for public political encounter and democratic negotiation, the place where political subjectivation emerges and literally takes place" (2010, 1) – to a social space subordinated to a neo-liberal logic of populism and competitiveness: "the creative city, the competitive city, the inclusive city, the global city, the sustainable city that replace the proper names of politics." (2010, 12). This contemporary urban order, inevitably, leaves room to excesses and inconstancies, since the post-political desideratum of including all social agents into the consensual order fails by radically excluding any social actor assuming a dissident position. These incongruences – describing an unbalanced society with its social inequalities, its uneven economic growth, and its fragmented urban development – are the perfect interstice for the restoration of the proper politics.

The occupation of this interstitial space is the only possibility of constituting a political moment, a moment of insurrection which could change the whole consensual structure, and it cannot be annihilated, since the revolution it's growing from the inside of the consensual space. For Alain Badiou the insurrection, the revolution and the political struggle are moments that express social contradictions, and "this is

why an insurrection can be purely singular and universal: purely singular because it's a moment, the pure moment, and universal because finally this moment expresses the generality of fundamental contradictions" (Badiou 2005, 1). Thus, the political moment constituted in the fissure of the Universal, in this possible interstice of the post-political society, is able to generate a radical alternative, a complete change of the Universal, since it could represent, in itself, the Universal. This is how Žižek explains the empty principle of the Universal, in which the void, the unstructured part of the whole destabilizes the entire structural order. If the void, the non-existent proper politics, the non-existing power of the dissidents, infiltrates inside the fragmented and kaleidoscopic post-politic reality it could undermine the consensus thinking and restore the proper politics.

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