

# Fragments to Culture, Arts and Intellectuals in the Era of the Unleashed Capitalism

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It is an ongoing question how to define societal space in relation to human conditions of existence. Meanwhile it is clear that universalistic concepts of such relations are as much obsolete as overall definitions of culture, arts and politics. But the end of the super-narratives is not the end of the necessity to think about human activities and actions. Not, as already the 17th century philosopher Spinoza points out, to laugh at them, not to moan about and as well not to condemn — but to understand them<sup>1</sup>. And it is Spinoza who first shows that the question of existence is not only connected to ideas but as well to incorporated practices — incorporated practices as ways of living. These practices, these ways of living are constituted by imaginary, emotional and epistemic elements. And again it is Spinoza who mentions that democracy is based on self-defined legislation of the community.

Especially this area where the symposium takes place, Tlatelolco, reminds us of governmental power that emanates not only from the people but becomes the property of the leaders. It reminds us as well that hegemony not only implicates consensus but also restraint and arbitrariness taking the death of people into account.

But this place also reminds us of the powers being stronger than the societal-humane ones. Thus it seems indicated for me to remind of the “Leibgebundenheit” — a German expression and philosophical term I use here in a contemporary sense and in reference to the Austrian philosopher Elisabeth List also<sup>2</sup>. This term could be translated as the consciousness bound to the body or as living depending on having a body.

The body understood here not only as an individual, socialized and gendered body but the body as a dwelling of consciousness, of social knowledge and cultural memory. The base of this living body is life itself, shared by all beings.

“Maybe a part of the good lies in life itself” the philosopher Aristoteles remarks<sup>3</sup>. But today this life itself seems to be increasingly in danger. Not in its entity but in the sense of an advanced criticality of social, cultural and natural systems how we can already observe it now. Today, culture and social reality as an expression of societal, political and economical conditions cannot be separated analytically any longer — if culture is not only understood as intellectual, imaginative and creative works only but also as various ways of social

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<sup>1</sup> Baruch Spinoza, “Tractatus politicus”, quoted after Robin Celikates, “Demokratie als Lebensform” in *Die Macht der Menge. Über die Aktualität einer Denkfigur bei Spinoza*, edited by Gunnar Hindrichs, Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag Winter, 2006, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. Elisabeth List, *Die Präsenz des Anderen*, Frankfurt on the Main, Suhrkamp, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer. Die souveräne Macht und das nackte Leben*, Frankfurt on the Main, Suhrkamp, 2002 (orig. *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, Torino 1995).



living and cultural expression. But finally culture, social reality *and* nature cannot be divided because not only culture and social reality but also nature is constructed by discourse. Nature is an effect of cultural apparatuses of construction and of such power relations masking their own production by discourse. This does not mean that nature does not exist. But it means that we do not “know” what nature, what its final substance is.

To take such a position implies to accept the “Leibgebundenheit”, the living depending on having a body, neither by reducing consciousness on the body only nor by a dualistic separation of body and soul, nature and culture. In terms of natural systems the danger is not due to the processes of change but to the speed in which they take place. Even if nature is very patient, nature is capable of jumps and of suddenly changing its conditions. The climate crisis, as it is mentioned in media in a sensational way, is not a catastrophe for the climate and the life itself. First of all it is a cumulative number of small, medium and bigger catastrophes caused mainly by socio-economical systems. As we already know, natural disasters do not change ruling conditions and differences of class, race, gender or culture but they deepen them. Finally, the materiality of the world, at least life itself, cannot be transcended or virtualized completely — but indeed it can be naturalized. The contemporary rationalization of rationality has its equivalent in a naturalization of nature — that’s what especially a poststructuralist-feminist theory criticizes for example in conjunction with the question of the gendered body.

“Maybe a part of the good lies in life itself” — Aristoteles additionally makes a restriction: “If the painfulness of life does not prevail too much” — if life itself is not overwhelmed by the strain of reproduction<sup>4</sup>. But today we are in the midst of an unleashed, multinational, hidden and legal pure capitalism unfolding unscrupulously and uncontrolled, heading on the fulfillment of its logic of concurrence, expediency, enrichment and finally self-destruction. The implications and results of this ongoing crisis of capitalism have already become apparent: The living and working conditions of a great number of the world population have become more and more precarious, not to say barbarian. The future wars will be waged not only for political hegemony or raw materials but also for the access to resources like clean water, food and fresh air.

The consequences of this unleashed capitalism, the question “what remains?” might develop a dimension which has been beyond thought until now and which could exceed ahead of the 20th century totalitarianism and its machines of destruction of the human being. And already this past of totalitarianism and its historical backgrounds like colonialism are still repressed especially within Western cultural and political memory.

But today the question “What remains?” must be asked as well in connection to post- and neo-colonial systems, wars, genocides, armed conflicts, political suppression, rape as military weapon and forced migration. Is there any memory at all? If yes, who reminds us of these events, its victims and above all: In which way is it remembered? Is oblivion not unavoidable because time is forced to continue? Because that what remains, the “consistency of the world” — to use a term of the philosopher Hannah Arendt — because this

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



“consistency of the world” is contained not in the life but in the things — and even if it is only in our dead flesh and bones?

Even today the “Leibgebundenheit”, the living depending on having a body, experiences its totalization in the naked life, in the *homo sacer*. The *homo sacer* is the human being in the state of emergency as the philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes him or her.

The *homo sacer* is the physical and psychical destroyed human being in the concentration camp or the displaced refugee. The *homo sacer* is the one behind any law and right, the one “who can be killed but is not allowed to be sacrificed.”<sup>5</sup> He or she is *sacer* / holy insofar as one can kill him or her without committing a homicide. The *homo sacer* is the culmination of violence a human being can experience.

This violence — the physical pain, the fear, the anger, the rage, the frustration, the claim, the denouncement, the desperation, the screaming, the indignity, the self-pity, the starving, the thirst, the powerlessness, the self-abandonment, the emptiness, the blunting, the total apathy, finally: The *desire* to die — ultimately the individual is suffering alone. The individual can derive comfort, halt and above all solidarity by someone — but the immediacy of the experience of violation stays in the living body itself. This immediacy can be remembered by the individual only — and this memory passes into the realm of the dead. No narrative can tell, no museum can exhibit, no photograph can document, no memorial can demonstrate this dimension of experience in extenso / completely. But what the narrative, the exhibition, the photograph etc. can do is reconstructing this experience. Such a reconstruction has the mission to mediate these experiences in the present and *as present*. Because “Only the intervening memory sets the present free which is included in the past — and which stays in this condition by simple remembrance” as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu points out.<sup>6</sup> At this point the problems of the cultures of memory occur: Which events will be remembered at all? Which victims and communities will be remembered in which ways? Who keeps the documents of memory under control, for whom are they accessible, how will the accessibility be provided? Where and in which ways will these documents be stored, sorted, combined, hanged, adjusted, placed, showed etc.? In which discursive contexts will they be localized? Which function, which goal does memory has? And finally: Who is allowed to speak about *such things* and who speaks about them from which position? The difficulty of these questions comes up again and again.

But is the national-socialist history of Germany finalized by the establishment of the Jewish Museum and by the raising of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe — Germany’s central Holocaust memorial site of six million victims? Is a nationally ritualized memory sufficient to install a consciousness about the production of history? Isn’t it also an expression of a neglect wanted by all means?

“History is being made, it is going forward” — this was the title of a song by a famous German new wave band Fehlfarben in the ‘80s. Although the band was sorry about this song,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.18.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu; Hans Haacke, *Freier Austausch. Für die Unabhängigkeit der Phantasie und des Denkens*, Frankfurt on the Main, Suhrkamp, p.119 (orig: *Libre-Échange*, Éditions du Seuil, 1994).



these lines showed that the German society was ready to historicize its responsibility and to install a “normalization” of its historical consciousness: A “normalization” allowing a participation of Germany in war again as in the ‘90s in Ex-Yugoslavia and later on in Afghanistan; a “normalization” allowing a reintroduction of “values” like nation, national pride and male connoted virtues (and as it became apparent especially at the last soccer world championship: Finally and without bad feelings the German flag could be waved again); a “normalization” dismissing the history of the “old” Federal Republic as a “special path” with the German unity in 1989 and finally a “normalization” dismissing multicultural pluralism, antifascism, pacifism and antimilitarism as no longer sustainable. Ironically it was not a conservative German government but the government of the social democrats and the Green Party, who finalized these “normalizations” for example by participating in war again. This was even harder to take as especially the establishment of the Green Party was the result of long fights for a change within the German society by left-wing, feminist and environmental movements.

The political dimension and difficulty of the question of cultural memory also come up in connection with the National French Museum of the History of Immigration, the “Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration” in Paris. Since the ‘90s this museum has been demanded by historians to install a public space dealing with the social history of migration in France. Critical historians and cultural operatives worked on the concept of this museum. The result is a mixture of partly critical but mostly vague representations of the French migration history and colonial politics. But shortly before the opening in October 2007, eight historians of the museum’s advisory board stepped back on the occasion of the constitution of a Ministry of Immigration and National Identity. They did not want to be exploited for an ominous political term of a “national identity”. This identity has already been affected by an ongoing desolate social situation of the French migrants. Their efforts of being included in the French society are fought by an intensified immigration policy, by militarized riot control forces and by deportation. On this background it is almost cynical to use the word “cité” for the museum. Because in French, the word *cité* means a community and it is associated with the right of attendance (*droits de cité*) and citizenship (*droits du citoyen*). “In the field of politics — but not only there — the official culture and its demanded respect condemn these ones to silence who are not accepted as the agents of this culture” as Bourdieu determines.<sup>7</sup> With regard to the role of museums it is therefore necessary to think about how communities can be included, not as a passive audience but as active agents.<sup>8</sup> And this also means to question the idea of the museum as a governmental-singular-container-memory-space more radically than it has been done until now, to deconstruct this space and finally to politicize it in the sense of an intervening memory liberating the present.

But not only can the intervening memory liberate the present. Especially art can challenge effective constructions of reality by opening up spaces beyond the dominant principles of rationalization. Art — to follow the ‘70s left-wing sociologist and philosopher

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<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Die verborgenen Mechanismen der Macht*, Hamburg, VSA, 1992, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Cp. Ivan Karp, “On Civil Society and Social Identity”, in Karp, Ivan; Mullen Kreamer; Christine Lavine; D Steven, *Museums and Communities. The Politics of Public Culture*, Washington / London, Smithsonian Institution Press, p.12.



Herbert Marcuse — can revolutionize the experience of the individual and can become a “political factor”<sup>9</sup> by its subjectivity, sensuality and esthetic. Especially in the arts Marcuse sees the potential to fight against social alienation and political domination. Here Marcuse refers to a radicalization of esthetical freedom, to the “esthetical power of imagination” as a propulsive power for the real liberation of people. On the other side, so Marcuse, art can legitimize dominance by producing a “beautiful appearance”<sup>10</sup> veiling the reality. This analysis of the ambivalent double character of art on one hand was influenced by the up-coming cultural industries and mass cultures and on the other hand by the ‘68s student’s, labor’s and women’s liberation movements.

Today we are at an advanced state in many respects. Art becomes an increasing factor for economy and corporate identity, for distinction and representation. The art market booms and even the art system orientates towards media attention, public appeal and business economics. Nowadays not only the old bourgeois, the nouvelle riche and private collectors, but as well banks and companies buy and collect art. The art collection of the German Bank for example, includes about 20 000 modern or contemporary art works of the finest — all of them pieces which a public museum could never afford and which are excluded from public access.

But what changes the role of art and culture much more is a governmental policy under the sign of neo-liberalism and “New Governance”. This policy I would describe as and summarize by “homogenization by economization” and furthermore as an erosion of governmental responsibilities. National as well as local governments concentrate public money mainly on the expansion of the capitalistic economy. They promote the “free market” by deregulation and privatization of governmental duties. The consequences of this kind of politics are more corruption, a massive loss of democratic participation, an intensification of already existing borders between minorities and majorities, a loss of access to resources like education, arts and culture — and finally an intensifying decline of living conditions. The national state becomes a “corporation state” — not by loosing governmental authority but by using this authority for the demands of economy only.

Within this policy, art and culture become useful instruments to label political hegemony and consumerism esthetically and to hold up the beautiful appearance of capitalism. The possibility of art to produce not only an affirmative but also a “real appearance”<sup>11</sup> loses its power. By “real appearance” Marcuse understands the capacity of art to remind the bourgeois society of the non-fulfillment of its promises like equality, democracy and humanity. Or to say it in more contemporary words: Art as an imaginative and analytical practice can open up new spaces of possibility and develop new strategies going beyond the existing conditions and restrictions. In this sense art can be subversive. But especially this kind of art is absorbed and disarmed noticeably by more and more perfect cultural industries and by the power of the media to mainstream information worldwide.

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<sup>9</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “Kunst in der eindimensionalen Gesellschaft”, in *Nachgelassene Schriften / Herbert Marcuse*, Bd.2: *Kunst und Befreiung*, edited by Peter-Erwin Jansen, Lüneburg, Zu Klampen, 2000, p.83, et sqq.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



This absorption hurts the intellectual field as well, a field already in itself embattled. The intellectual field itself can be read as a game following its own rules concerning powers, positions and possibilities. It is also influenced by external powers affecting from outside. And in this sense it seems indicated for me to come back to Gramsci's concept of the "organic intellectual". The "organic intellectual" is the one who organizes the resistance against hegemony, enforcement and consensus on a symbolic, semantic and cultural level. In terms of an actualization of Gramsci's concept certain questions come up I will refer to only briefly.

Firstly: Within the battles about hegemonic predominance the basis of capitalist economy — abstract labor, commoditization and citizenship what means the separation between the bourgeois and the citizen — this basis as a legal structure of society is not removed within Gramsci's concept. From my perspective, this is the weak point in Gramsci's argument because Gramsci does not touch the state as a constitutive structure and element of society. And as already Karl Marx noticed: Neither the state nor the market can form a human community. Or to say it in other words: State authoritarianism is only a complementary equivalence of the authoritarianism of the market, as we already experienced in communist systems. Certainly, today it is almost impossible to imagine a society without any forms of governmental organization. Therefore Gramsci offers an approach useful for a further development of theories of the state.

Secondly: To what extent can a dominant class become obvious in highly functionalized and complex societies? In societies where every human being is increasingly individualized and isolated? Certainly, leading and political elites can be stated ensuring their profit and pursuing their interests only. Certainly, it is more than cynical if one top manager *earns* 30 million US dollars and even more per year. Certainly, the fourth world already arrived in the first world. But who precisely is responsible for what and above all who can be made responsible?

Thirdly: Today, the traditional class antagonism is out-dated. But this does not mean that there are not marginalized and subaltern groups as well as class differences existing. What it means is that these groups themselves are not homogenous communities and easily classifiable groups any longer.

Fourthly: By overestimating the cultural superstructure, not less even leftist intellectuals do not take into consideration that socio-economical and not ethnical or cultural differences are the basis of a lot of problems within societies.

Fifthly: In terms of the civil society today left-wing, feminist, anti-capitalist, migrant, queer, social and urban movements fortunately still exist and not less artists, cultural producers and intellectuals participate. These movements consist of intellectuals being part of and representing subaltern and marginalized groups. These groups are defined and constituted on a symbolic and semantic level by these intellectuals. But such representations can lead to at least theoretical dead-ends as it becomes visible in terms of identity politics for example.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Here, the problem is to identify a situated subject or class like for example “women”. Furthermore critical discourses and counter-publics are formed and deformed by exactly such discourses, institutions and incorporations they want to contradict and to change. Often, this vice-versa influence implicates a depoliticization — as it can be seen in conjunction for example with the gay and lesbians liberation movements.

Sixthly: The consequence of all these questions may not be that one gives up the fight against class, race and gender, against exploitation, suppression and the dominance of the elites. Here the intellectuals have to intervene indeed and to take on a political position by communicating their critical analyzes in public. On longer hand and together with other activist communities, this might offer the possibility to create a new strategic alliance of revolutionary powers in the sense of a multitude — a multitude going beyond nation, state and capitalist economy as well as going beyond class, race and gender categories.

Finally: To resist an absorption by the general consensus, by a mainstreamization and depoliticization, as a critical intellectual the need is to reflect all these ambivalences. This means to question the own position and the ways of representation over and over again — and furthermore to cultivate a consciousness “that the human being is more unlimited than again. Hereof it is the “Leibgebundenheit” and the life itself reminding us that political communities have to guarantee the right and the possibility for each member to live in physical and psychical self-determination, dignity and acceptance.

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx; Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Vol. 1, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1976, p. 408.