

# The New Ugliness of the Oppressed vs. The Oppressed as Ornament

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This is not a lecture but a seminar, and it has two subjects which may converge at one point. The first one is based on the title of a famous article by Gayatri Spivak, *Can the artist speak*, and the second is about a phenomenon that I call 'The new ugliness of the oppressed'. Or the excluded.

You know, I don't know how come these kinds of situations have become desirable; people spending their Sunday afternoons in a seminar, even though they have all the degrees in the world, and have been sitting in academies for so many years, but they still feel the need or even the desire to go back. This is the kind of development we've been observing over the last 15-20 years, but it has gotten to a new stage. In the 90s, this was still some kind of 'underground' situation; a dissident artist group would organise seminars or discursive meetings in opposition to the aesthetic of vehemence that the art market was producing. Now it's a global phenomenon, far beyond those small circles, and at the same time, it seems it still has anti-market intentions, as an alternative to the art market.

The big subject matters in art academy discussions right now are: what is research for artists? How would we define academic work done by artists? How can an artist get a PhD?, so there seems to be kind of a response on behalf of the institutions towards these strange desires to meet on Sunday afternoons. I mean, I myself, this year, I tried hard, but I couldn't get out of academic situations. At first, in the academy I used to teach, where I try to guarantee my normal household income, I started to teach less, but then, there was another academy in the summer, and now there's a Sunday afternoon academy even here in Berlin. I'm about to get paranoid about this. This all is still point number one talk. So the problem they have in these debates on how to establish or institutionalise artists making academic work is: how do we define the discourse of artists? What that would be? How to define the specific artist discourse as opposed to the discourse of art historians? Why is that different from what an art historian does for a PhD? And this question is, of course, unanswered.

One possible solution is to establish a second ego for the artist, a second persona which is able to talk academically and is perfectly educated in the scholarly way, knows how to quote, knows how to structure a paper, a complete academic, but still an artist on the side, or in some other part of that person's personality. So this would mean that the specificity of the artistic-academic discourse is nothing inherent to that discourse, but an academic discourse by an artist.

The second possibility is for institutions to somehow define what would be an artistically specific way of speaking. One proposal lies in a very successful book by Boltanski and Chiapello, in which they establish the term 'artist critique', as opposed to a social critique, which emerged from the classic workers movement. They claim that there has always been something in the development of modern western societies, over the last century, that they call the artist critique, which is not an artist's criticism of injustice but a criticism of

in-authenticity, a criticism of not being able to fulfill your real needs. The interesting thing is that they establish artists as a specific social group, one which cannot directly be implemented within the definition of an artist discourse in the academy (because it's not a specific discipline or something you learn, but a social position), but it's at least an interesting beginning.

One very formal, but plausible and useful definition, is that of artistic practice as interrupting the speech act. An artistic sentence, if we follow this abstraction, is one that would not count on the response the same utterance would count on in a daily life situation. So the artist's utterance would be one that is inconsequential, as in the famous example of speech act theory regarding the actor who screams "fire!" But what would that mean for the discourse of an artist in an academic institution that asks for consequential utterances? If you look at the way that this is handled in the daily life of artists, you'll find several escape routes, the first coming from the aesthetic of production, and the second escape comes from the aesthetic of reception, both of these strategies avoiding the simultaneity of intentionality as an artist and intentionality as a speaker.

The first, I would call the technical discourse, a discourse in which the artist talks about art by distancing himself from the intentional element, the plan; talking about technical problems, and how technical problems were solved. Now, in order to explain how you remove technical problems, you are already disclosing some of your intentional behavior as an artist, but you are not responsible, you are acting as if this intentional side has been decided beforehand, you are only involved in technical problems. And yet this technical discourse is a very powerful one.

The other one, its polar opposite, it is the political discourse; that's the one where you're not talking about what you are doing, or how you did it, but to what end. You're talking about effects, about situatedness in a non-artistic world, basically about the way you are conceiving your reception, or your audience.

So art institutions had given this problem a form by means of the master. The master was someone speaking to the artist as a model for someone as yet unfinished, and who was supposed to emulate the master once finished. This is interesting because the master's discourse can only work if you externalise the site of intentionality, and put that into a tradition – if you claim the intentionality and the authority is based on the tradition of all the other masters. And basically over these last 20 years, the debates about what is to be the discursive practice were always debates on how to replace this discourse, usually attempting to escape through the technical or the political.

But another widespread artist discourse these days is one that sometimes falls back into an imitation of the master's discourse; it's what I would call the strategic discourse, the one in which you conceive of the discourse of an artist as something inauthentic. It is not the true voice of the artist that is speaking, but some kind of supplement to the work. The work is primary; I'm doing the work, and in order to help my work, in order to propagate it, to improve its reception, I'm talking in a specific, strategic way, and this strategic discourse is only defined by that which befits the higher purpose, the work. And that kind of discourse has the advantage of being flexible, it changes from addressee to addressee, it is only based on the work, it is flexible to the point of being almost pointless. In the end, you just reaffirm the fact

that the work is not speaking the language of daily life, so this kind of talk is ultimately nothing but the extension of the interruption of the speech act within speech.

So these are the main forms of artist discourse, this is the material that the institutions and the bureaucracy would like to standardise.

The last point of this initial part of our discussion is my response to the title of this whole project, my attempt to include this within the conversation; I'm referring to the institutionalisation of productive failures. Is that the way we should look at it? As some kind of paradoxical attempt to come to terms with the difference between consequential utterances and the spaces where art practices are possible? This is not just a matter of choosing a discourse, for at the heart of this matter is a problem pertaining to bourgeois society as a whole. Something which renders visible a much larger, crucial rupture within the way bourgeois society is constructed. I think we have different ways to deal with that. One would be to concentrate on this problem as an unsolvable problem, not to close the wound, but make it as contradictory as possible, concentrating on the fact that you will never close the gap between artist and academic, as long as the society is based upon the ideas it is based upon. (You can of course point out that art's exceptionalism is problematic, but being problematic is something people enjoy.) Or we could try to heal the wound voluntarily by offering alternatives, defining some kind of outside of this unsolvable problem, and solving the problem for ourselves alone, sidestepping the problems of society by being utopian. So you can refuse to heal that wound or you can escape from it, or you can argue for both. Personally I wouldn't necessarily prefer one to the other.

**Audience:** It is definitely true that the institution is a privileged ground on which certain conflicts become visible, but at the same time it always makes me uneasy if we treat the institution as a privileged site. So my first question would be what struggles outside the institutions could we see as linked to struggles inside the institution, to this new kind of struggle over the definition of knowledge, or artistic production as knowledge? How can we open up this field and go beyond the academy, and link these struggles to other conflicts in the wider field of art production?

That aside, you were saying that two prominent discourses so far have been the technical and the political and you were suggesting that these discourses are limited because they allow the authorities to objectify art practices, and to resist objectification, we would have to invent other discourses that go beyond the technical and the political. What could these other discourses be?

**D:** The connection between institutions and the world outside is the relation between different definitions of consequentiality. I was arguing that an artwork is defined as non-consequential by society. The newer types of academies pursue clumsy attempts to solve this old problem of the legitimisation deficit for art, saying this kind of inconsequentiality has to be compensated for by making artists academics, so they are, in a way, contributing something to society. In one way the market expects the very same: excitement and escapism, and, of course, commodities. The main struggle in the academy is not so much over knowledge but privilege, the privilege to be inconsequential without necessarily being entertaining, without necessarily producing commodities, and the battle over definitions begs the question of whether you can

call it research or not? Is it any good for society or not? This is where they're fighting about right now, and you are right in saying there are other struggles outside the academy, which are not necessarily the career struggles in the market; struggles over meaning, signification, aesthetics and other things that have political consequences and a political framework.

As for the second question, I think the limits of those two discourses, the technical and the political, depend on what you want from them. My problem with both discourses is that they address either the aesthetics of production or the aesthetics of reception, but not the aesthetics of the work and this is no drama, no problem perhaps. Maybe I don't have to know anything about the work, maybe I don't want to. But it's crucial if you want to define what artistic discourse should be, if you want to institutionalise it. I myself, I'm not necessarily trying to institutionalise it; I'm just trying to explain problems that bureaucrats have these days.

**Audience:** Maybe we should make a stronger statement for art, and formulate the idea of art that is not limited to the framework of the institution, because when we limit that to the framework of the institution, we're already making it commensurable, already making it objectifiable, and I think it is important to search for discourses beyond the institutional discourse. Negri and Agamben could be useful in terms of their discourse on life, almost as a kind of neo-existentialism, a life we live when we are not part of institutional procedures. Wouldn't that be interesting to think about? This critical discourse about institutional politics leads to a kind of sociological scepticism, where we confine ourselves to discussing institutional conditions, and maybe today, the discourse of resistance could be the point beyond the logic of institutions, towards something that could lie beyond, towards life, or towards attitudes through which art actually becomes consequential, because it has an effect on how people live.

**D:** I have a problem with life. I agree with the need for another discourse, and that is exactly what I'm trying to say. That we should open the wound. The things people come up with when they attempt to do that are highly interesting, and are strong cases for art in a non-trivial way.

**Audience:** And what is the problem with life?

**D:** Well, what does it mean in this context? Is it life as opposed to art? Or as opposed to what? Death? Life as what? Bio-politics?

**Audience:** As opposed to institutions.

**D:** Yeah, but then what is institutionalisation? If you call whatever is not part of the process of institutionalisation 'life', then you're bordering on a kitsch idea of the possibility of the authentic. Institutionalisation is in most cases bad, but that is because of what institutions want from us, and how do we deal with that? The pure existence of institutions is not my problem, so I'm not looking for an outside *per se*, as in a life or a religion. If you conceive of a world outside institutions and legitimise it by connecting it to ideals of the real, the good, the authentic, well, that's no longer political, it's religious.

**Audience:** Can I make a statement for life then? Something I find fascinating in Negri and Agamben is that they are not describing life as being the outside of the institutions, but life as the margins of the institution. The material the institution uses is life; from school to death, our life is the kind of material that feeds the machine, so on the one hand, life is absolutely inside the institution because this is the stuff the institution runs on, but on the other hand, life is also on the margins of the institution, because it is never completely commensurable with the machine. So suddenly there's this new idea of a radical ethics, of taking care of your life, of thinking about the attitude that you have to life. And that is, for me, akin to art, art as an attitude to life, as a form of humor, as a stance you take in terms of what you think is good about life, what is enjoyable. By taking this stance, in life, through art, you move beyond the authentic. It is not about authenticity, it is more about theatricality, for it gives you a voice through which to articulate a strong stance towards life. You formalise, you form or shape your own life by making art or writing texts or upholding the discourse of embodiment as a discourse of life, as a discourse of art, embodying knowledge differently, through the way you live, and maybe embody something that is different to what the institution could ever embody.

**D:** I think this is correct in that you're referring to the way life is controlled, and the way life is feeding the machine. But if you're looking at the way life is being mistreated or instrumentalised and assuming the good life is the one outside, you're making a mistake.

**Audience:** It's about the margins

**D:** Margins are the outside. You're using the term 'margins' in order not to say 'outside'. Whatever comes out of this idea of the good life as something beyond mistreatment, the idea of taking care of your life - living a good life, smoking less or having more sex or whatever - is just an individualist solution, and individual solutions are never resistance. I've nothing against it, I support everyone who is attempting to do this, but it's not resistance.

**Audience:** I'm sure you've obviously read Agamben. He uses bare life in a positive sense; it's not only about concentration camps, and the state of exception, or the notion of a life you can end without being punished, like the brain-dead patient or the terrorist suspect. He also picked up the idea of the miracle, the positive side, in the idea of getting away from identity politics, as a way of challenging the state, or the institution. Over the last 30-40 years I've been colonised either as a woman, or as gay, or as a lesbian, even when you have a search for recognition through particular rights. And in Agamben's definition lies an attempt to go beyond this desire for individual recognition of rights. This is not just individualism. It's not just hey, I'm gonna do what I want to do, write a paper, shop in Gap, or H&M, buy a Vodafone, whatever. It could be something between radical individualism as defined by the market, and politics as an extension of the state, a state that is working on a normative idea of its citizens.

**D:** This sounds very interesting, and you can indeed argue all that through the idea of 'bare life'. When Agamben uses the term, his point is that the loss of human rights only occurs through exclusion, but that those who are excluded are also, in a way, free. I wouldn't argue that way myself, but you can do so with Agamben. I would also support your attempt to get away from identity politics, but why do you need bare life for that? I don't see any reason for it. It has nothing to do with any practical idea of politics. How can you base your claims towards states and institutions on bare life? How would that work?

**Q:** Couldn't one redefine Agamben's bare life, which he uses for extreme cases, and bring it a bit more into the middle, as a kind of a liminal stage, an in-between of aesthetics?

**D:** Art is based on institutional agreements between those who are working within them, and those who are producing it, while the state of exception in Agamben is based on no social agreement whatsoever, it is a necessary condition for maintaining those who are not living under this a state of exception. Now I don't know if I follow him on this, on the idea that you need the state of exception and bare life and exclusion in order to produce a social contract within. I think the state of exception that forms art is part of the social contract within bourgeois society. Of course you can say, with Agamben, that art therefore reveals how the rest of the society is based on exclusion and oppression, but it nonetheless becomes something very different to bare life.

**Q:** I was in a seminar with Chantal Mouffe, who rejected what she calls "all those Italian anarchists," who believe the only way you can do proper politics is outside the institutions. She was saying we can only save democracy if we work within the institutions and radicalise the promise of democracy that is already inherent within. And I take it that this is basically your position; let's not get lost in some kind of bohemian anarchism, let's radicalise the democratic profile. But on the other hand, for the sake of opening the discourse, it's worth thinking about all these figures, these communities that formed around life. The biggest question at the moment is how to speak about different lives without falling into the pitfalls of individualism. From Agamben to Nancy to Derrida, they're all asking this question, developing community models based on radical difference. Derrida talks about the community of those who have nothing in common, Nancy suggests that in art you speak as an individual, but you always speak for others, for while you write or produce you reach out to others. This ethics of reaching out is some kind of strange social contract that remains unknown, and never leads to a kind of rigid constitution, but is still some kind of contract. These momentary alliances of individuals that are not organised around manifestos or institutions, these communities of those who have little in common, they offer a different perspective on institutions.

**D:** It really depends on which problem you want to solve. If you want to talk about these little communities of people who have nothing in common, they're great in certain stages of struggle, but you cannot build a society on them. I mean, I'm not as much of a social democrat as Chantal Mouffe, I wouldn't say you have to work with the institution, and that they have a democratic promise, I'm just saying you have to work with some of them, and maybe you have to build them anew.

At this point I would like to move on to a second part of the discussion, one which has been magically anticipated by some of the questions and discussions we just had. The second part addresses the new ugliness of the oppressed. I've been thinking about the limits of political intellectuals, vis-à-vis politics, and I found a lot of interesting contributions to this debate in different writings by Pierre Bourdieu, who is talking about the logic of practice that the intellectual does not understand. It's equally interesting to look at artists, as in, for example, Morrissey's famous statement for vegetarianism in the song, *Meat Is Murder*. In *Meat Is Murder*, you have the argument, avoid meat or "This beautiful creature must die." This is the formula for aesthetic bias based on the ability to empathise. For the political stance within this framework,

it's absolutely crucial that it's a beautiful creature. What I'm getting at is not some kind of ignorance on Morrissey's part, but certain preconditions for artistic references to the political.

We have this modernist western tradition of political solidarity that refers to global situations in which the political contradictions of the moment are exposed in a specific, drastic way, or in which the specific actions of western governments are involved in a specific way, making the west guilty of obvious political crimes and so on. And this tradition of solidarity has for a long time worked through the logic of Morrissey's song; that is, these beautiful people have to die. They are oppressed, excluded, objects of imperialism. I think what can be observed right now is a shift towards a new way of portraying western global action, and this is meaningful in the light of certain manoeuvres in the art world, where real people are brought into art, as in the work of Hirschhorn, Sierra, Beecroft and others.

What is important is that we now have ugly others. In Germany over the last few weeks, the ugly other, the ugly underclass has been a huge thing. This debate about the underclass was even stronger a year and a half ago, when it was constantly exhibited on TV, always wearing the wrong clothes. But you have the same on a global scale, where the opponents of the west are no longer beautiful, or endowed with justified ideas, since they're crazy Islamists. I'm not saying that this has completely changed the notion of solidarity, but it has left the old logic of projection behind, which is the logic that there are people who are different, and if you're a benevolent leftist westerner, they are in one way or another good people, and you are with them, on the same front, even if this shared struggle has nothing to do with reality. They are still the same people, but we don't have to like them any longer.