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The Aesthetics of Resistance

Giuseppe Patella

Abstract

Talking about resistance means raising the question of opposition, of denying all attempts at neutralizing opposites, which would be typical of ideological construction, either political or aesthetic. This essay investigates the meaning and the reasons of resistance according to a theoretical, aesthetic, and cultural point of view. The thesis is that resistance has to be considered as an articulation of difference, and that means following a different logic of thought, no longer rigid or monolithic but plural, like a new grammar, syntax, and practice of creativity, challenge, provocation, multiplicity, and pluralism. In this sense the aesthetics of resistance is an art of difference, the capability of creating cultural formations that provide elegance and refinement.

Key Words

aesthetics, challenge, difference, intellectual provocation, resistance

1. Resistance and the question of opposites

What do we mean when we talk about resistance? Considering resistance requires, first and foremost, finding the right words and concepts for doing so. Thus when we speak of resistance, the question we must ask ourselves is how to contemplate opposition? To speak of resistance is indeed to raise the problem of opposites, which in turn means responding to the problem of conflict.

If we begin with the recognition that opposition does indeed exist, a recognition that denies all attempts at neutralizing opposites, which would be typical of all ideological construction, either political or aesthetic,^[1] we must recognize that, faced with society's growing complex processes, opposition can no longer be thought of in traditional terms or according to past perspectives. This means that it can no longer be contemplated according to classical logic related to the concepts of identity, which does not recognize the existence of the other, of the heterogeneous, and of the distinct. But neither can it be considered from the dialectic point of view, still dominant in the twentieth century, that is based on the concept of contradiction: the battle of opposites would lead to overcoming conflict through dialectical contraposition between positive and negative.

So if the logic of identity and dialectic logic are now excluded, and even the logic of so-called polarity in which opposites are considered entities presupposing and sustaining each other reciprocally, four other fundamental perspectives, each distinct and irreconcilable, can be characterized. All of these propose ways of contemplating opposition and present several other theoretical answers to the problem of opposites.

In short, the first position contemplates the problem of oppo-

sites by reducing conflict, by pacifying and harmonizing opponents. This is the typical solution of the aesthetic tradition, which always seeks to reconcile opposites, overcoming all conflict, and which is found today in discourses that propose to rediscover and rehabilitate notions of beauty and harmony.[2] A second position, on the contrary, proposes making opposites radical and conflict extreme. In the aesthetic field this is manifested by appealing to notions of the sublime, giving rise to what we could call a kind of aesthetics of terror.[3] A third position, on the other hand, moves towards the relativization and the problematizing of opposites, towards a presentation of the terms of conflict based on irony and masking. This is the course considered “postmodern” by many, which has distinct exponents and representatives all over the world.[4] Finally, a fourth position is one that could be based on the notion of difference, which contemplates opposites in a non-symmetrical, non-dialectical, non-polar way, through the concepts of acuteness and provocation.

Without entering into the individual merits of these situations, each having its own virtues and defects, the only one that appears open to an effective experience of conflict is that which allows for contemplating opposites, and therefore resistance, as the articulation of difference. But what does it mean to understand resistance as the articulation of the difference?

2. The articulation of the difference

First of all, resistance goes in the opposite direction of aesthetic conciliation. It moves towards an experience of conflict larger than dialectic contradiction, towards the exploration of opposition between terms not symmetrically polar to each other. Hence, resistance presupposes a logic of difference understood as non-identity, as dissimilarity larger than the logical concept of diversity and the dialectic of distinction. So then, as we know, it has been characteristic of poststructuralist and postmodern thought to add the question of the difference to the agenda of theoretical and political debate. The topic of difference is one of the most important results we have inherited from these thought experiences, and which we can still apply today in the arena of contemporary reflection.

In its best theorization, and here I think specially of Jean-François Lyotard,[5] one must recognize that postmodernism has left us with the tendency of attuning our sensibility to differences, honing our capacity to accept the undetermined, the shapeless, the immense. It has accustomed us to resist simplification, the banal, the univocal, while instilling in us the pleasure of incessant search, of continued shifting of horizons of hope; in short, it has opened up to us the channels of plurality, multiplicity, difference. Thanks to postmodernism we have learned to mistrust everything from indubitable certainties, absolute principles, and essentialist and totalizing visions, to univocal and comforting answers.

Understood as siding oneself with a distinct logic of thought, no longer monolithic but rather plural, nonlinear and discontinuous, following transversal paths, we must then recognize that postmodernity from now on, with its logic of difference and plurality, represents an irrefutable cultural

conquest.

3. *Witz and agudezas* as substitute formations

But today, with a new millennium already under way, it appears we are escorting something paradoxical. On the one hand we have an inflation of the Other and, consequently on the other band, a reification of its concept. For example, within the framework of the political, as seen from the European geographical standpoint, the rightwingers of xenophobic tendencies assume their role as carriers of ideas of difference by celebrating their diversity, specificity, and exalting them excessively, never negating them. Take the case, for example, of the diffusion of the so-called *Front National* in France, of the PVV of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, and in my own country, Italy, of the *Lega Nord* (Northern League).^[6] In all these cases, and we could add many others, we are obviously dealing with reactionary positions resulting in a process of essentializing difference. Differences of identity are rendered absolute by connecting them to the exaltation of national, regional, provincial, and local parameters, to the vindication of petty individualist, egotistic, and partial interests. We find ourselves, hence, face to face with ideas of difference that are absolutely ideological, determinist, discriminatory and intrinsically xenophobic, as well as carriers of exclusion and division on all levels.

Therefore, confronted with this essentialist idea of difference, the temptation of resuming the old idea of identity, of uniqueness, not in shades but rather pure, clear, and distinct, is implied. However, we must resist this temptation and still bet in favor of difference that can be reduced to neither a deliberate nor generic invitation with respect to, and in tolerance of, diversity. The idea of difference is truly too important to leave in the hands of the new ideologues circulating today, or in those of so many old diehards of various forms of supremacy (white, Occidental, male, etc.).

In the light of the challenges of our time, faced with predominating forms of singular thought, of a new global order extending from economics to politics, from religion to society, confronted above all with communication imposing itself as an informative ideal in every sector of social and cultural life as manifested in the tendency to conform with the model of the publicity message, with the attitude of simplifying and lightening content, of confirming and flattering all levels of mediocrity and vulgarity and thus revealing the true oppressive and mystifying nature of communication, it remains indispensable to affirm the principle of difference, to activate forms of resistance, and to develop strategies of opposition.

It would be absurd, however, to oppose these currently prevailing tendencies, which for many constitute the unobtainable horizon towards the future, in favor of forms of conservation or nostalgia for a now unrecoverable past. This resistance cannot simply be expressed in terms of negativity, much less of universality; rather, it would have a specific, determined function, it would be at once different, plural, contingent, and propositional. Its differential movement must not mean nostalgia, rejection, or resignation but rather transformation and transfer. In this way, resistance does not mean inertia or defending the status quo; it is a slower and

quasi-imperceptible but continuous and insistent movement of transformation, of differentiation between levels and reality.

With respect to a purely transgressive or nihilistic vision of resistance, typical of not only the vitalism of the seventies but also of negative thought that thinks only in terms of negativity and head-on contraposition, or with respect to a prophetic vision that focuses its attention too far on the future and thus renounces the moment in question, we lack an insistence on active and present forms of resistance, multiple and differentiated, in the personal place of the contender, and renouncing all totalizing will of authority and violence.

The resistance we are thinking about rejects taking an apocalyptic or visionary position, but at the same time it avoids being watered down to the level of surrendering to the society of spectacle and generalized communication in which we live. Resistance cannot fall into the naïveté of head-on confrontation with the enemy in which "the illness of the chains," as Nietzsche called it, is perpetuated. We cannot be naive to the point of believing that we can defeat the adversary so easily, much less conciliate or even think of changing places with him. It is no longer a time of exalted mystics or prophets of misfortune but of courageous thinkers who know how to differentiate between conservation and transfer, between immobilization and transformation, tactics and effectiveness.

What is lacking today is solid but subtle thinking, fluid but resistant, ingenious but not absent-minded. It is a thinking that is capable of submerging us in the flow of the current while at the same time always distinguishing between levels, transferring essentially distinct, different messages. To this end, it would perhaps be convenient to remember the teachings of Walter Benjamin who, although believing himself deprived of illusions with respect to his era, spoke unreservedly in favor of it. The attitude the modern resistant should have is therefore that of a remote interest, a kind of trusting disenchantment, of skeptical admiration that puts it in direct contact with the present, with its transformations, without otherwise leaving us frightened, much less dazzled.

However, considered far from the logic of identity and contradiction, difference is not understood as an absolute foreignness, like radical transgression that frequently, as alternative and speculative behavior, is functional to the very system and ends up re-enforcing it. Lacan and Derrida have taught us otherwise: we can never truly find the other, the different, without domesticating it, incorporating it, reducing it in some way to the same.^[7] The work of difference is really a differential movement that incites us to deconstruct the illusion of a pure theory of alterity and of difference,^[8] and instead to contemplate a kind of foreign familiarity, an ambivalence that inextricably unites identity and alterity, the inherent and the foreign.

The model for this foreign familiarity could come from the field of psychoanalysis and be traced, for example, back to so-called "substitute formations" of which Freud speaks. In fact, Freud refers to the aesthetic category of *Witz*, or acuteness, as the formation or establishment of a substitute between terms strongly opposing one another because of the true

difference existing between them.^[9] Acuteness is thus the aesthetic mode for contemplating difference, and it makes room for cultural productions endowed with great fineness in which opposites are contemplated in a non-symmetrical way.

They are recognized and maintained in their alterity without being conciliated, annulled, assimilated, or converted one into the other. For this reason difference is an art; it is the product of the subtle, the capacity for contemplating formations with great fineness and acuteness.

In the context of an Occidental aesthetic, together with the idea of beauty as harmony, symmetry, and conciliation,^[10] that is, the classic idea of beauty, there has, as well, always existed a diverse, alternative idea, a strategic idea of beauty thought of as the experience of opposites and as challenges. The aesthetic of difference finds its very roots sunk in antiquity and the Baroque age. Think, on the one hand, of Heraclitus, who even in antiquity proposed the idea of the fight between opponents as the principle governing all things. And, on the other hand, think of Baltasar Gracián, who, in the seventeenth century, the Golden Century of Spanish culture, theorized about the notion of acuteness, understanding it to be a “decoding” attitude penetrating the depths of the real to subvert the natural order, therefore discovering acute and efficient, strategic and refined, forms of beauty.^[11] These ideas met up again later in some theories of twentieth-century avant-garde movements, such as the Surrealists, who proclaimed not to know how to handle the idea of beauty contemplated as balance and harmony, and for this reason they proposed that “beauty will be convulsive or it will not be” (Breton).

4. Challenge and provocation

In light of these considerations, the idea of resistance as difference cannot but assume the traces of an experience of challenge and provocation. But what is understood by these terms? At the heart of the theory of challenge, over and above all else, is the abandonment of an organic and totalizing idea of society, as well as all theory of social equilibrium. Society, even more so today, is not something static or monolithic. What makes it move is not the harmonious desire of pacification and consensus but instead of conflict, that is, an incessant fight for individual and collective recognition.^[12] A few recent critical philosophical theories make evident these very aspects.^[13] Furthermore, distinct from transgression, which presents itself as a moment of rejection, of deviation from the norm, thus maintaining a dialectical relation with the very thing it tries to distance itself from, challenge moves in a different terrain and entails another appreciation of its contenders and its own role with respect to the symmetry between them.

In the wake of the “Sensation” artists, what is presented today as an example in the field of contemporary art appears perfectly placed in the environment of searching for transgression, in the wake of the already-spent transgression of the avant-gardes.^[14] Apart from this, such art, now canonized and fashionable, is born of specific commissions from the media and publicity worlds seeking only to propagate their own ideology. This art does nothing more than form a

functional expression of the system, perfectly integrated in the logic of the dominant market. In it, there is no true challenge, no real provocation.

In addition, the challenge alone is no longer sufficient, for it still requires the conflict to be understood as a kind of duel between opposite and symmetrical entities, and it demands, furthermore, an appeal to a new system of norms for regulating future competition. Only with provocation do we situate ourselves, from the very beginning, in a terrain different from that of the adversary. Between us and the adversary a radical asymmetry is established, a difference, like that which exists, for example, between conscience and unconsciousness. In this provocation, what is important is the perturbing effect of "uncanniness" (*Unheimlichkeit*) obtained when appealing to something that has remained latent in the adversary, and which he or she cannot manifest without its force appearing to be destroyed.

In this dimension, when we consider the ideas of challenge and provocation, we cannot help but think of the way the two are interpreted in dandyism, for example. This is on the condition, however, that all traces be eliminated from this phenomenon that would make it simply an expression of a decadent sensibility or a form of aestheticism.^[15] However, before the environment in which the dandy moved was that of the world, the terrain of everyday life, what Baudelaire called *la vie modern*.^[16] Here the dandy immediately situated himself in an alternative manner, valorizing those strategies of behavior and action different and foreign from the dominant logic.

The dandy cannot keep this up if there is no measure of challenge. His entire existence is devoted to nothing but continuously challenging the constituted order. His essential provocation is his distancing, his absolute exteriority, converting himself into nothing and no one in order to adhere fully to his time and to the reality of things. The dandy therefore bets on difference and the unpredictability of the historic process. In this sense there follows a paradoxical strategy, a kind of politics of the impossible that is supported by the unpredictable, by collision, by the hidden complicities it can arouse. The result is not guaranteed but, more important, this is not essential. It is not the conquest for power or riches that drives the dandy. His succeeds result to the extent that he succeeds in provoking reaction and igniting imagination by his ability to resuscitate stupor and evoke admiration. If life is nothing but fight and conflict, what moves the dandy to action is a constant sense of challenge understood as a dangerous experience to which we must continually expose ourselves.

5. The intellectuals and the grain of sand

Challenges, provocations, and examinations do nothing now but delineate an aesthetics of resistance. This is understood as the practice of difference, which is before all else a cultural practice, a practice of contemplation that vindicates once and for all an effective dimension of knowing. So that what appears to impose itself with force is a new figure of the intellectual, certainly not in the traditional meaning of the organic intellectual, but rather in a more fluid and blatant sense of the term.^[17]

I believe that today there is no reason to be embarrassed by this word. On the contrary, we must reaffirm the centrality of the intellectual presence, claim its autonomy with strength. Its meaning, today, should be such that he who presents a challenge to society, to the world, finds grounds in everyday life and carries forward a contrasting idea of culture, keeping alive the knowledge-power bond inherent in all theory.[18]

The conditions for this to happen are, nonetheless, that intellectuals keep their distance from both the conformity and academism of institutional thinkers as well as from the sectarianism and extremism of outsiders. Generally, what the former lack is the emotional energy, and the latter, the realistic perception of cultural dynamics.

In fact, today it happens that, on the one hand, knowledge has become bureaucratized to such an extent that it has systematized so much into a guaranteed order, making it almost impossible to give recognition to anyone not organic to this same logic. On the other hand, the organization of culture and the regimentation of public meaning have become so strong and ramified that they make even dissent irrelevant. This situation could nevertheless be overcome if we would only realize that today, more than ever, we find ourselves before a common enemy represented by the hegemony of the market and by the predominance of the one and only logic of profit. Thus, facing a common enemy, we must develop a common front. Both institutional thinkers as well as outsiders must understand they are producers of goods, cultural and symbolic goods, that pertain to an economy distinct from the dominant one, and it is in the interest of both to safeguard the autonomy of this environment.[19]

In his final works Pierre Bourdieu strongly maintained that, at this time of the worst economic globalization, we should oppose the denationalized internationalism of men and women in culture. We should do this by resisting kitsch products of globalization in the name of values connected with exercising free, autonomous, disinterested activity.[20] This implies freely and seriously developing one's own intellectual work by rigorously analyzing what surrounds us, and consider how each of us can contribute to unmasking the dominant ideology and resist its triumph over us. Here, we are participating in the operation of throwing a "grain of sand in the well-greased cogwheels of resigned complicities." [21] It could sound naive today, but it seems the only thing to do.

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Endnotes

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