

Session II

Art and politics

The artist is somebody who does something to be exhibited in public, and the same goes for the politician. Indeed: Platon took the words “art” and “politics” to be two names for the same thing. The question is: why do we no longer quiet share his opinion? (Although some of us may agree with him that politics is an art.) Here is the preliminary answer: we do no longer despise art just as much as he did.

The reason why Platon held art and politics in contempt was not the fact that both of them exhibit: as far as we know he had no objection to prostitution. The reason was that both art and politics attempt to impose ideas, (art upon objects and politics upon people). He held that if you impose an idea, you have to adapt it to what you impose it on: to objects and people. By doing so, you betray the idea. For instance: if you draw a triangle on sand, you will find that the sum of its angles is no longer exactly 180°, and if you impose an ideal state upon people, you will find that it is no longer ideal. To find this out, you only have to look at the idea before it was imposed, and compare it with what the artist and the politician have done to it. The look at ideas, and the look at mishandled ideas shows wrong ideas, and this is called “opinion”. Platon holds art and politics in contempt, because they lead to opinions, which is the opposite of wisdom. The lover of wisdom, (the “philosopher”), is the only critic of art and politics, (which are the same thing called by two different names), because he is the only one to have access to true ideas.

Consider how the critic goes about his business: There is a market place surrounded by houses. Inside the houses are people who handle ideas to impose them upon something, (for instance they handle the idea of a pot and impose it on clay, or the idea of a shoe and impose it on leather). When they have finished doing this, they take their “work” and put it in front of their door: the exhibit it. They do so, because they want to exchange it for some other “work”, for instance, the pot for the shoe. If you permit the pun: the market place becomes an “art forum”. The problem this poses is: which are the criteria that govern the exchange of the pot for the shoe, (which state how much the pot is worth, what is his value?) And the answer is: he who sees the ideal pot, (and the ideal shoe), knows its true value. Therefore the

critic, (the philosopher), walks up and down the market place, (the “art forum”), he compares the works exhibited there to the ideas seen in theory, and he fixes their values. That is to say: the philosopher governs the market place, (he is the “king” of the city). (Of course: what goes for pots and shoes goes for any other political opinion.)

The artists and politicians submit their opinions to the judgement of the philosophers, (like it or not), because they have no better criteria, and they do not want to fight each other. Take the medieval town for example: it is surrounded by walls which open their gates every day of the week except Sunday to let in the fruits of the surrounding fields, for instance eggs and flour. Those products of “economy” are exhibited on the market place on one of its sides, and the “works of art”, (pots and shoes), are exhibited on the other. Then the philosopher, (the bishop), steps out from his cathedral, walks down the market place, and he fixes the true price of exchange, the “*praeium iustum*”. His is the only authorized critic, (the king of the city), and if his authority is contested, there will be war between the town and the fields, and between the various streets in to which the trades are separated. Thus art criticism is a question of life and death, and he who opposes his opinion to the theoretical, (authorized), critic will be publicly burned. This is accepted “catholically”, (by everybody).

However, in the course of the 14th and 15th century, the artists, (artisans), rebelled against the philosophers, and they deposed them. The reasons why they did so are complicated, but they may be stated simply: the philosophers disagreed between them as to how true the ideas are to be looked at. One school of thought, (the “realists”), stated that the ideas may be discovered through logic, and the other school, (the “nominalists”), affirmed that the ideas reveal themselves to faith alone, (“*sola fide*”). Now if the authorities quarrel thus, their criteria can no longer be taken as valid. The artisans stepped in, and they took over the government of the city. Politics took over, and submitted theory to its purpose. The artisan does not share the theoretical view that he is betraying ideas. He holds, on the contrary, that he is inventing ever better ideas, ideas that may be progressively improved upon, as they are being imposed upon various objects and people. He holds that ideas are models which may be modernized, and that the purpose of theory is to supply the artisans with ever better models. The result of this revolution, (this submission of theory work), is modern science and technology which leads to the Industrial revolution.

Now consider what this did to the philosophers, (now better called “intellectuals”). They were expelled from government, and enclosed into ghettos where they were fed by the politicians, so that they might elaborate models. The politicians divide them into two classes: one was to produce models which are useful for working, (scientists, technicians, proposers of

ever better models), and the other was to produce models which amuse the politicians when they are not working, (“artists” in the modern sense of that term). This modern division of our culture into a “hard” one and a “soft” one. And the ghetto was divided into two quarters: universities and similar institutes for the servants, academies and similar institutes for the clowns to live in. However, the ghetto posed a problem to the artisans who now governed the city: what can be done to prevent the intellectuals from sneaking out of it, and from meddling with politics, (the government of the city)? From biting the hand that feeds them?

The solution was to surround the ghetto with a glorified aura, to give the intellectuals a “social status”. The “great scientist” who is child-like where exposed to the world, and the “great artist” who lives in splendid isolation. But this did not prove to be a perfect solution. The useful intellectuals, (the scientists), kept believing that what they were after were “true ideas”, and not only models for a progressively improving industrial production. And the useless intellectuals, (the artists), kept believing that what they were after were models for new experiences, (“aistehsthai”=to experience), and not only wall decorations. Now this was a danger: the scientists may come up with models which render the politicians useless, (in an industrial production and in the government of the city), and the artists may come up with models which show that work is not the only source of value, and that therefore the artisan, (the industrialist), is not necessarily the best king of the city. In short: there was a counter-revolutionary climate within the ghetto, and the intellectuals, (the philosophers), never really accepted their submission to the artisans, (the politicians).

The markable thing about this is that the artists in the modern sense of that term, (the clowns), were now opposed to the artists in the classical sense of that term, (the artisans become industrialists and politicians). This becomes quite obvious just after the Industrial revolution, when the Romantic artists, who are the sons of industrialists, advocate the abolition of industry, (of the fathers who feed them). Somewhat later, the artists prefer to die of tuberculosis in the mansards of the industrial towns to submitting their clownship. This is remarkable because are not the artists doing exactly the same thing the industrialists and politicians do, namely imposing their ideas upon objects? What, after all, is the “ontological” difference between a plastic fountain pen, and a painting or a musical composition? Are not both the results of a “political” opinion?

Take the plastic fountain pen as an example for this troubling problem. There is a machine which is an instrument built according to models proposed by useful intellectuals, (by scientists and technicians). There is a plastic material which is fed into the machine from outside. There is a tool which was inscribed with the shape, (the “idea”), of a fountain pen,

and that tool was made by a tool maker which we cannot help to call an artist. The machine presses the tool against the plastic material, (it “works”), and out come plastic fountain pens, one almost exactly like the others. Now, according to the governing politicians the “value” of those pens flows from the “work”, (from the machine which they own, and into which they have invested the results of their previous efforts). But according to the tool maker, (the artist), the value of the fountain pen is not to be found in the work which produced them, (nor in the plastic material), but in their shape: they are worth whatever they are worth because of their fountain-pen shape, of their idea. And it is therefore not the politician, but the philosopher, (the one that sees the idea), who should criticize them.

This is indeed a curious situation: the moment the artist becomes king, (transforming himself into an industrialist), he gives rise to a new type of artist, whom he considers to be his clown, but who denies his right to judge him, and who submits, by his own free will, to theoretical, philosophical criticism. Of course: this sounds very funny, but it is one of the crucial aspects of the present situation.

Work, in the present situation, has become divided into two different gestures: a “soft” one, and a “hard” one. The soft gesture handles symbols in a way which results in the elaboration of models, and the hard gesture imposes those models upon matter. The soft gesture is executed by people whom we must call “artists”, and who are equipped with computers and similar apparatuses. The hard gesture is executed by machines which are becoming rapidly automated. In this transformation of work there are several aspects which strike us. The first one is that the actual imposition of a form upon material, (“work” in the strict sense), has become a mechanical, no longer a human, gesture. The second aspect is that those people who handle symbols to make models with them, (the “programmers of the machine”, the “software people”), although they are “artists”, (because they hand in “ideas”), are also “philosophers”, (because they do not apply those “ideas”). And the third aspect is that there is no longer much sense in wanting to classify those people into useful and amusing ones, into servants and clowns, because the models they elaborate are both “scientific and technical”, (they may be applied to work), and also “artistic” (they are meant to be pleasant). In other words: the present situation can no longer be analyzed either by Platon or by politicians.

Not by Platon, because all of a sudden here we have people who contemplate forms, (who live in “theory”), but who handle those forms while looking at them, (on a computer screen, for example). Those people are artists become philosophers or philosophers become artists.

And not by politicians, because all of a sudden here we have people who program work, (who “govern” it), without necessarily owning any machines, and without having left their ghetto. To put this in other terms: all of a sudden here we have people who prove that “theory” and “art” may fuse, and that “art” and “politics” may mean two different ways of life altogether.

It sounded funny, a few paragraphs earlier, when it was said that the artist become king submits, by his own free will, to theoretical criticism. It no longer sounds so funny. It now means that the artist-king submits his models to his own theoretical criticism, before he feeds them into machines which automatically transcode them into hard matter. It now means, in other words, that art criticism no longer steps in after the work is done, but now is part and parcel of the work's project, (its program). There is no longer any sense in wanting to criticize works: they have already been criticized, before they began to be executed.

This is the situation as it emerges: artists, (people who handle forms with a view to applying them), govern the city. They are called “system analysts”, “futurologists”, “technocrats”, “media people” and so forth. They do not govern the city. They do not govern the city by applying their models directly, but by programming machines, (and other people), to do so. In this sense they are “philosophers”: they contemplate the forms, they have a theoretical vision. Politicians may not yet be aware of it, but they have become automates programmed by those “philosopher-artists”. This is the reason why we can no longer agree with Platon when he puts art and politics in the same bag: politics have been disposed, and art governs the city.