

## **PRESENTATION OF CASA AT THE CONFERENCE “SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND ACTIVIST RESEARCH”, BARCELONA JANUARY 2004**

*Text to be sent in advance*

### **INTRODUCTION OF THE PROJECT**

The idea of CASA (Cultural Analysis Summer Academy) emerged out of discussions about the function of academia in society, and about the role of the academic or intellectual in society. We started to discuss these issues during the year of 2003, a year in which the world system has changed dramatically, or in which changes that had been taking place for some time have become painfully obvious. The war against Iraq has shown the disregard of major world powers for international organizations, institutions and rules that have originally been introduced to protect the human rights of each world citizen, and that sought to attempt to introduce a world order that is governed by mutual agreements and consensus.

At the same time we witness the worldwide imposition of an economic system that is based on the exploitation of many by few. One of its policies that have so far had the deepest impact in 1<sup>st</sup> World Countries has been the privatization of public services. This policy takes the control over public services such as education away from the state and places it in the hands of private owners. In doing so, it reduces the role of the citizen in the organization of society. The citizen has a right to appeal to the state, but not to private entities.

These developments demonstrate clearly that major players in the international community, as well as on national and local levels, attempt to “objectify” people. They need their votes, but do not listen to their concerns. Rather, they provide false information, be it on the reasons for going to war or on the success of the economic system they are implementing. Thus, they in fact seek to deprive people of the agency that the democratic system seeks to grant them.

As young academics we raised the question of how academia should act within such a constellation. A reaction is in order for two reasons. The first reason is that the policies of privatization demonstrate how an economic system seeks to instrumentalize academia to become an institution of professional apprenticeship rather than one in which students

learn to think critically. The second reason is that we do believe that academics have a responsibility towards their society, and that the humanities can make a useful contribution to society. But we also realize that society seems to be less and less interested in what academics – especially those coming from the humanities – have to say. Academics in turn, instead of trying to counter his movement, withdraw deeper and deeper into the (self-constructed) Ivory Tower.

Faced with these shifts and challenges we feel that the responsibilities of academics and the role of the academy within society have to be rethought.

Some of the questions we see ourselves confronted with are the following:

- 1) What is our place in civil society? Are we academics, are we theorists, or are we intellectuals? What is the difference between the three and how would we define them?
- 2) Is there any way that the academy can become a force that feeds into, and is inspired by, the society it functions within? If there is, then how do we perform this task?
- 3) On a very practical and technical level, how do we perform our task as teachers? If our objective is to educate our students to think independently and critically we have to confront and answer the question of the impact of our selection of certain books and articles. Does not the very fact that we choose some and leave out others enforce some standard of right and wrong? How can one teach someone to be free?
- 4) In social situations—and which situation is not social—our actions also express a choice, either in our choice of words, or in our performance. Each choice carries with it an exclusion of the not-chosen. In many cases this exclusion will be oppressive, and clash with the desire, which is had by many, that everyone should be free.

## **CASA MEETINGS**

Discussing the above-mentioned questions we came to a point at which we felt that the questions that were being raised need to be discussed in a larger context. Out of this desire developed the idea of a meeting with people from different backgrounds and different disciplines. The meeting should be open and appealing to people from various backgrounds, such as academics that consider themselves to be critical but not activists, to academics that also consider themselves to be activists, to activists who are not academics, and to other members of civil society who are interested in the questions

raised. To provide the framework for such a meeting we decided to discuss a theoretical concept that sums up the dilemmas and questions outlined above, and connect it to a concrete political topic that allows for the discussion and investigation of how concrete political issues and policies affect the role of the academic in society. We did not conceive of the meeting as a usual conference, but as a meeting place in which we construct and discuss “theoretical and practical images which are seen and experienced from different places”, to use a formulation of the Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos referring to a different project.

The first CASA meeting will take place in June 2004. We chose “Spectating – Acting” for theoretical concepts and “Privatization” for the political issue. The meeting will be organized in a workshop format. The participants contribute to a workshop in the form of papers, presentations or other projects. For the sake of coherence the contributions should engage with the topic of the CASA meeting and should integrate several key texts, which are put up on the website. Each workshop will be given an email list and a moderator. The participants of the workshop are then responsible for organizing any further procedures of the workshop themselves.

### **CASA PRINCIPLES**

We want CASA to be flexible. It is an open and receptive discussion forum and setting anything in stone would contradict its purpose. But in the early stages of the project several principles have emerged as being so fundamental to the project that they have shaped it and without them, it would not be the same. These principles are the following (order has nothing to do with importance):

1) **The public function of academia.** We do believe that academia – or the humanities, as most of the current CASA participants come from these disciplines - have a public function. We also believe that this function is not static, but dynamic, and that it needs to be reenacted and rethought continuously.

2) **Communication / Public Spaces.** CASA acknowledges that the communication of the academia with those outside the universities is an important aspect of research. However, CASA also acknowledges that for several reasons communication between within and outside academia has become increasingly complicated. One of the aims of CASA is to develop a discourse and a mode of engagement and dialogue that enables such a

communication. Therefore the CASA meetings take place in public accessible places, where everyone who passes by can listen and contribute to the discussion.

As an extension of this idea CASA has been confronted with the fact that public spaces are being increasingly privatized. The activity in public spaces – especially in the urban context – is being increasingly reglemented. Similarly, educative policies are moving increasingly towards the privatization of educational institutions. In claiming public spaces for analysis and its presentation, CASA emphasizes the importance of education and research as a public activity and responsibility.

**3) The context of academia.** Research and teaching are taking place within a context of social and political developments that shape the conditions under which they are taking place. As one of the principles of CASA is the public function and responsibility of academic thought, CASA will always discuss theory in connection with such political or social issues.

4) **Analysis.** CASA seeks to put theory and activism into dialogue. That means that CASA considers theory to be a valuable aspect of public life. The problem that we see is not with theory itself, but with how it is being communicated.

### **THEORETICAL ASPECT: SPECTATING – ACTING/ THE DILEMMA OF AGENCY**

CASA focuses on the dilemma that comes up when one combines the desire to right wrongs with a non-universalistic and non-essentialist line of thinking. Attempts at such a combination get caught up in the dilemma of choosing between two wrongs, because in righting a wrong a new wrong occurs. The new wrong results from one's inability to turn to universalistic or essentialist guidelines when righting an existing wrong. Agents can only turn to their own particular and cultural background on how to deal with a perceived wrong. What is more, they can only rely on this particular and cultural background to perceive that there is a wrong in the first place. Taking this into account, agents, when trying to right a wrong, immediately come close to forcing their own views on everyone. They become liable to repress other perspectives, since they are unable to escape their own. This repression is what constitutes the aforementioned new wrong. Agents are herewith left with the dilemma of choosing between an already existing wrong and the creation of a new 'wrong.' This dilemma we will call the "dilemma of agency". It is the theoretical underpinnings of this dilemma that we want to investigate in the CASA series; in the hope to understand it, and perhaps find alternative ways of tackling and possibly resolving it. For many of us this dilemma has become especially pertinent in a world where wars are

started for humanitarian reasons, and multicultural society is increasingly a tool for ethnic oppression.

The 2004 CASA meeting addresses the dilemma of agency in relation to the concepts of 'acting' and 'spectating.' The relationship between these two concepts ('acting' and 'spectating') is crucial for any discussion on agency. This is due to agents always being caught in this dynamic relationship: necessarily being both, an actor and a spectator. Like Adorno in "Commitment", and Eagleton in *Literary Theory*, we contend that there is no "spectator-like neutrality", and that every spectator is always already engaged in, and with, the world. The engagement of the spectator with the world has two aspects. On the one hand, there is the perception of the object, which means to engage with that object. On the other hand, there is the 'subjective' commitment of the spectator to the object. As Merleau-Ponty states, this latter aspect is largely due to the having of a singular perspective. Moreover, because this engagement within a singular perspective is grounded as a commitment, we believe that spectating necessarily has the potential to lead a subject to act.

If one believes that spectating plays at least a minimal role in causing actions, the dilemma of agency, as sketched above, arises. If actions are steered by personal views of the world, then actions aiming to help others clearly become problematic. Is there any room left in our actions for the other to remain the other? In other words, can we prevent ourselves from oppressing the other in our attempts to help them?

One suggestion that we especially want to deal with in this year's CASA meeting is Adorno's suggestion that we should choose between spectating and acting. Adorno claims that after Auschwitz we can choose to remain distant and be spectators of what is going on from our own engaged perspective, or we can ignore the dilemma of agency and continue acting like we have always done.

In CASA, we want to question whether we are really forced to accept this dramatic choice. Accepting the necessity of this choice leads to the conclusion that those who ignore the dilemma of agency and act are just as much in the right as those who remain observers. This has become increasingly hard to accept in the current context, especially since international politics seems to have opted for acting blindly. Accepting Adorno's analysis

would now be nothing but an implicit acceptance of the choices made by a few, but affecting many. For many, the analysis provided by Adorno of the ‘dilemma of agency’ is no longer satisfactory. The question that becomes more pressing every day is whether there is no other way to resolve the ‘dilemma of agency.’

One of the issues this year’s CASA meeting addresses is how engaged spectating might lead to action. In other words, how is it that people come to act? And, can an action be perceived as originating from an engaged spectatorship? But not only will we address these more philosophical issues, we will also look beyond them to more concrete and, perhaps, more pressing questions.

The more concrete question that will be central to the 2004 CASA meeting is the question if it is possible to teach freedom. We believe this question to be crucial both in international thinking—since entire countries are being taught how to be free—and in national discussions—since private entities like companies are becoming increasingly more influential in education. This increasing influence of companies on education opens up several questions about one of the basic activities of a scholar; the activity of teaching. Ideally, universities should teach students the material they need to know as well as it should enable them to make choices freely on the basis of the knowledge and understanding they gain. However, at this point we return to the ‘dilemma of agency’ because, as we have said above, if the teaching is steered by the personal view of the teacher, is there still any space for the other to remain other?

#### **A FEW MORE THOUGHTS ON SPECTATING AND ACTING**

The two concepts “Acting” and “Spectating” conceptualize the tensions we have outlined above. We would very much like to discuss these concepts and peoples’ ideas and associations with them at this meeting. In the following we would like to share some thoughts about the terms that will maybe help to spark the discussion.

We have received some criticism about the fact that the verb “spectating” according to the dictionary does not exist, and that it implies a value judgment. We have stuck with the term for the following reasons:

In “Commitment” Adorno writes about the “spectatorlike neutrality.” One of the basic issues that we want to discuss at CASA is related to the issue of neutrality. If one has a problem with the neutrality – as most of us do - then one conversely has to find out what the spectator is actually doing. We realize that the term is controversial and can be understood in several ways. One is related to passivity and consumerism. The media, for example, turns events such as famine, war and genocide into a spectacle and viewers are limited to consuming the event within the provided text. If one were to apply terms like “witnessing”, “envisioning or “looking” to describe such an action or attitude one would neutralize what is happening and in a sense perpetuate the “spectatorlike neutrality.” This aspect of “spectator” indicates passivity, consumerism and the existence of a spectacle that is being consumed by the spectator.

However, “spectating” can also be understood as a term that describes a point where “looking on” and “being active” blur into each other. In a brainstorm that we did on what we mean by “spectating” we came up with ideas that put terms like viewing / seeing / envisioning on the verge of acting. The line between where one stops looking and starts acting becomes fuzzy. Thus, the term indicates that one does not just jump from seeing to doing. Rather, it provides a name for a space between “looking on” and “being active” where something that we cannot quite define happens, and this might lead to action. Some of the questions we need to address are what it is that happens between “looking on” and “being active”, and whether we want to define “spectating” as an activity that is already merging into action.

Thus, “spectating” might provide a new word and new angle for the discussion of the relationship between practice and theory. is the dynamic in the space I referred to above, the space where the distinction between “looking on” and “being active” becomes blurred. The remarkable thing about the Iraq war was that people were looking on the eve of it, but then they decided to process what happened and to translate it into an action. There is a dynamic that might start with looking but which then transforms itself into the activity of the agent, and that’s what we could call spectating.

The term “acting” emerged as clearer from our brainstorm, in which we used both “action” and “acting”. On a positive note it was defined as a way to connect the individual with the social and with a desire to communicate. However, the terms carried a lot of ambivalent

associations as well, such as the remark that “acting” requires the agent to be free, and that an agent can also deprive someone else of their freedom through acting. Finally, acting can be done blindly without consideration for those around, or without having analyzed and assessed the factors that determine the situation the agent wants to act on previously.

Thus, both terms are ambivalent. Their very ambivalence opens up space for discussion and interpretation, and allows them to be applied as tools for analysis to many situations.

### **PRIVATIZATION**

We have so far suggestions for the following round table discussions on the topic of privatization:

- 1) Alternative Ways of Organizing Education/Participation in the Education System
- 2) The Privatization of Education in the context of GATS
- 3) How much Company Involvement is good for a University?

These three events are conceptualized as round table discussions at the end of each day. We would very much like to offer workshops on these topics during the day as well, and are looking for people who would be interested in organizing those.

**POSSIBLE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:****Analysis/Theory**

- what do the participants think of the idea to put theory, activism and society into dialogue through an event like the CASA meeting?
- would the participants agree that theory is a valuable aspect of public life and that the problem does not lie with theory itself, but with how it is being applied and communicated?
- how do the participants of the conference see what we have called 'the dilemma of agency'? Is there a dilemma? What other aspects than the one we outlined above might it have?

**Privatization**

- How does privatization change the conditions of education and research in the countries and universities of the participants? Has there been any research done about this? How is the resistance against privatization articulated and manifested? Also, we would like to hear people's responses to the idea of combining the theoretical concepts with the more concretely political issue of privatization.

**Communication**

- in its meetings CASA seeks to provide an occasion for dialogue between those that are activists but not researchers, those that are researchers and take a critical position but are not activists, and the general public. This constellation opens up the question of how can we establish a respectful communication between those that want to be critical but not political, and those that make that step? Is it useful to do so?

- here it might be useful to discuss the difference between critical and political. The Subcomandante Marcos says that critical thinking leads to political thinking: "El quehacer intelectual de izquierda debe ser, ante todo, un ejercicio critico y autocritico. La critica se convierte en el motor unico del pensamiento." Is that really the case? How does the transition between critical and political take place?

**Workshops we so far have suggested:**

- The impact of language: "The Word as Mirror and Lense"
- The politics of difference/ the engagement with Otherness

- Positioning of the spectator in visual art
- Theoretical/ethical discussion about "Spectating" and "Acting"

Are there any ideas for more workshops? Would people like to organize workshops themselves?

### **The Idea of Participation**

One of the major criticisms that has so far been leveled against CASA from more established academics is that the idea of participation behind the project is not clear. How do the participants see this problem? Might it be useful to think about a clearer definition of how we envision "participation"?

Could this idea of participation become the link between activists, academics and civil society?