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The Monobloc Chair: Democratising the Practice of Sitting

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Abstract

This article examines the cultural history of chairs to understand the many meanings the Monobloc can acquire. The history of chairs is traced from post-nomadic culture through the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment period and the French Revolution. Subsequently, I will examine the Monobloc from a Cultural Studies perspective and demonstrate how its unique characteristics allow multiple meanings, which are always dependent on context and discourse. Thus, the Monobloc becomes an utterly democratic symbol of popular culture that can be appropriated for any use.

Keywords: furniture; culture; heritage; popular culture; monobloc

Cultural Studies scholars' interest lies in questions of power and resistance. This interest is owed to the discipline's Marxist origins. We are driven by the desire to understand how 'the people' encounter political, social, and economic structures in their everyday lives, how they produce and reproduce them, how they resist and change them, and how they are empowered or weakened by them. Culture, simply put, is understood as the communal reflection of and emphasis on links between certain practices at certain times within these socioeconomic and political structures. Therefore, the Monobloc constitutes

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an apt object of Cultural Studies analysis. It is deeply embedded in the structures that are at the heart of Cultural Studies' academic interest, and it is inextricably linked to practices of this amorphous conglomerate usually termed 'the people'. I will hence start with exploring the cultural history of chairs in general before turning to an analysis of the Monobloc proper, which will be supported by the arguments of a few Cultural Studies theorists, such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Miguel de Certeau, and John Fiske. In doing so, I will examine how the Monobloc can be regarded as a democratic chair as it liberates the constructing of meaning and turns meaning-making into an act of resistance.

Discussing chairs cannot be done without discussing the practice of sitting first. Chairs are cultural artefacts which derive their meaning in relation to humans. As Lisa Landsteiner remarks, humans can sit without chairs, but chairs are difficult to imagine without thinking about sitting on them.[1] Sitting comes natural to humans: Who sits, stops walking or standing. While sitting, thus, is an instinctive position, chairs are imbued with human meaning. At the heart, creating an artificial place to sit separates humans from other animals. Moreover, the status as cultural artefact embeds chairs not only in cultural, but also in political and social practices. Quite often, chairs indicate, either by spatial positioning or design, power structures which define social participation through, respectively, inclusion or exclusion of the chair's occupant.[2] Therefore, it is not only relevant for analysis how a chair looks like but also how it is positioned in its environment and in relation to other chairs.

Consequently, chairs make their entry into human history as means of visualising the mythical exaltation of gods and goddesses. Hajo Eickhoff links the emergence of images that portray sitting deities to the end of human nomadism and the concomitant outset of sedentariness.[3] Within the very word 'sedentariness', we can trace the etymology back to the Latin word *sedere*—to sit. When sedentary communities started to form societies with hierarchical

structures, chairs transitioned from the metaphysical plain into the physical world: In the same sense that the first chairs exalted higher beings, community leaders were seated on chairs; the first thrones. Thrones were not designed to be comfortable sitting accommodation but connected leaders to the spiritual plains of the gods. With their seated position on the throne leaders occupied a transcendental position in their community.[4] Worldly chairs, thrones, were thus imbued with human and culturally specific meaning. They signified the transcendental connection to the divine, hence lending their occupant a power that differentiated him from other community members. The use of thrones to emphasise symbolically one human being's higher status was visible in Europe's royal courts until the predominance of absolutism was ended. Renaissance and Baroque styles have mostly shaped cultural imagery of royal thrones. French designs are dominant here, as Louis Quatorze's court was emulated throughout Europe in the seventeenth century. The Sun King's belief in divine kingship also reflects the transcendental connection to the godly realm that coined the emergence of thrones as chairs for rulers in the first place.[5]

Vice versa, the empty throne became a powerful signifier for the vacant position of rulership. A vacant throne often signifies the communities' disorientation, lacking leadership. Hence, the vacancy instils into the people the need to fill it, and many wars of succession, throne wars, have become the central focus of popular fiction. 'Is the chair empty? is the sword unsway'd? // Is the king dead? the empire unpossest?' asks Richard of Gloucester, for instance, the eponymous character of Shakespeare's play "King Richard the Third".[6] Seeking to occupy the throne—and, by sitting on it, assuming rulership—is also the driving force behind the plot of popular culture narratives, such as George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the successful television adaptation *A Game of Thrones*. We also find the symbol of the empty throne

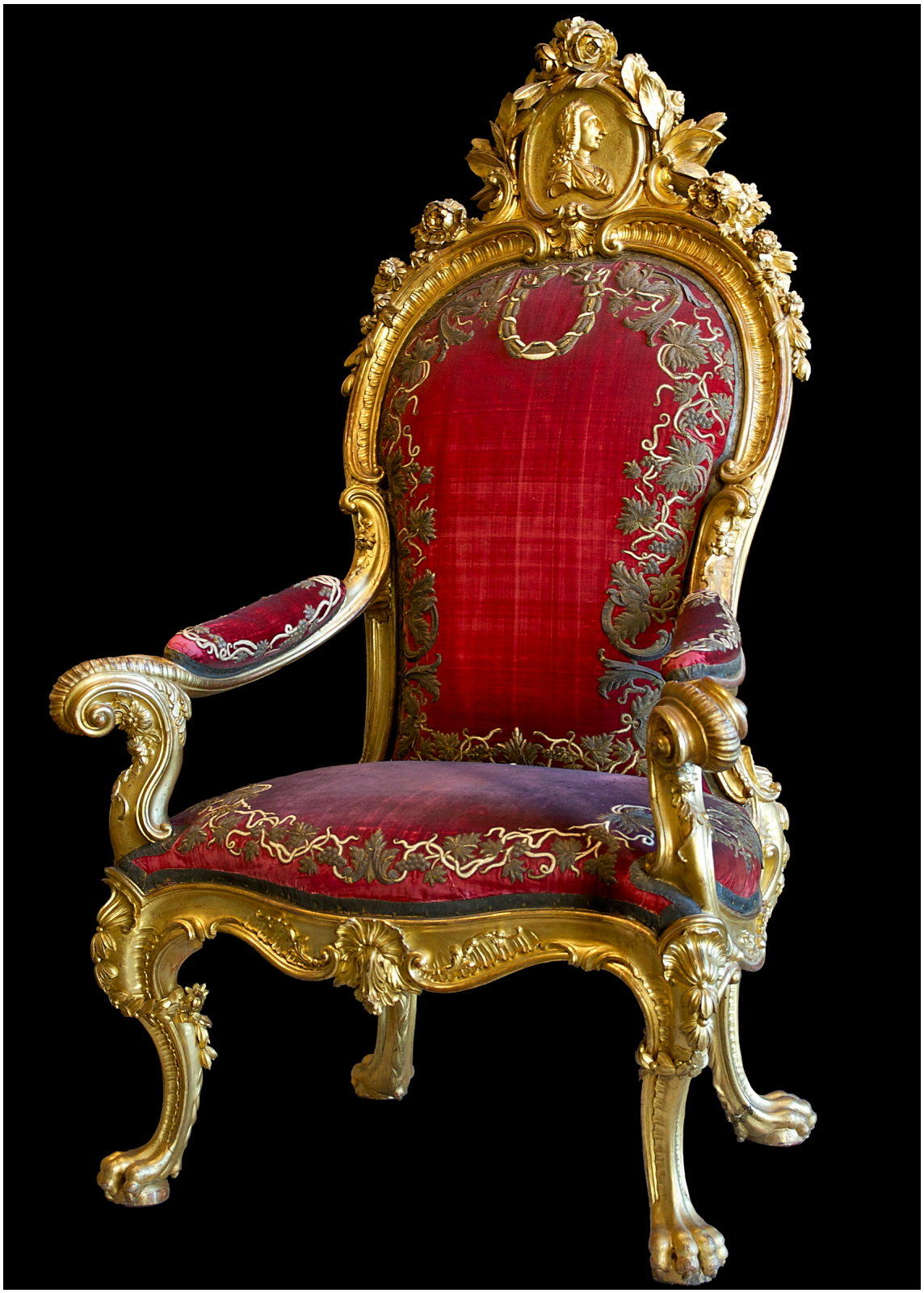

Fig. 1 - Throne Charles III of Spain
Source: Jebulon for photograph. Gennaro di Fiore, Naples, for sculpture. / CC0

in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: When Pippin and Gandalf arrive at Minas Tirith, Gondor's devastating condition echoes in the absent ruler on the throne:

> At the far end upon a dais of many steps was set a high throne under a canopy of marble shaped like a crowned helm; behind it was carved upon the wall and set with gems an image of a tree in flower. But the throne was empty. At the foot of the dais, upon the lowest step which was broad and deep, there was a stone chair, black and unadorned, and on it sat an old man gazing at his lap.[7]

The throne and its occupant imbued each other with meaning, constantly enforcing and reinforcing the notions of power, transcendentality, and difference, and building a powerful symbiotic relationship.

These symbolic notions of the throne also carried over into one of the other dominions that shaped European life in the early Anno Domini centuries: religion; or, more specifically, Catholicism. In medieval churches, only higher dignitaries were allowed to sit down while the parishioners had to remain standing or knelt down. It was not until the late Middle Ages that benches were introduced in churches. It is significant that the congregation was provided with benches, not chairs. Sitting as individuals remained a clerical privilege in churches, just as individual chairs were reserved for members of the aristocracy in the secular realm. Etymological traces in the Roman-Catholic vocabulary point further to the religious importance of sitting: Bishops' seats are named 'cathedrals' after the Latin *cathedra*, stemming from the Greek compound *kathedra*, which in turn is derived from the two components *kata*, 'to sit', and *hedra*, 'down'. In addition, the exalted position of the pope—both within the Roman-Catholic Church in general and among church dignitaries in particular—finds expression in his occupation of the Holy See, the *Santa Sedes*. As Landsteiner points out, according to traditional Roman-Catholic understanding, the pope derives his position exactly from the occupation of

the See of Rome, making the *Santa Sedes* the denomination of the papacy itself.[8] The pope is regarded to be infallible only when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is sitting on the throne of Saint Peter.

As I have mentioned already, the symbolic notion of chairs as exalted, or at least differentiated, seats for privileged strata of society remained relatively unchanged throughout the Middle Ages. Even when the Reformation proclaimed the equality of all believers before God and introduced the right so sit during service also for parishioners, they installed benches in churches, not chairs. A radical change in the meaning of chairs came when revolution hit Europe. The French Revolution marked the end of absolutism and, at least for a time, the exaltation of individual leaders over their communal fellows. With these radical changes in positions of power, both secular and clerical, chairs also lost their predominant notions of signifying transcendentality, power, and difference by means of that power. As with other former privileges of aristocracy and clergy, sitting on chairs became *bourgeois*.

Although the French Revolution deprived the chair of meanings of differentiating power and transcendentality, its philosophical influences added a new one. In the Age of Reason, the chair became a symbol of discipline. The Enlightenment sought to discipline the human body in order to strengthen the mind. The thinking subject was put into focus and thinking and reasoning became the defining human properties: *cogito ergo sum* expressed the mind's ultimate dominance over the body. And where better to think than on a chair? Since the Enlightenment, generations of children were taught to sit down and be quiet, to discipline their mind and focus on intellectual work. Whereas working classes did manual labour in factories, the chair became the working place of the bourgeoisie and, to a certain extent, it still is.

In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution finally took from the chair any notion of elitism that had persisted still. Due to cheaper manufacturing costs, ever more people could afford chairs for their homes.

However, the chair remained a signifier of discipline also at countless family dinner tables, where children had to learn to discipline their bodies. At this time, the Vienna coffee-house chair became the epitome of chairs. Free from aristocratic and bourgeois history, Michael Thonet's 'Wiener Sessel' was awarded medals at the world fairs in London in 1851 and Paris in 1855 and sold in millions around the world. Its 1859 edition no. 14 is still sold today. In the Austro-Hungarian capital, bentwood chairs turned into the symbols of the celebrated coffee-house culture. In Vienna's numerous coffee-houses, people met, discussed politics, founded reading societies, or played chess. To put it in a nutshell: On bentwood chairs, people sat down, disciplined their bodies, and focused on mental activities.

With industrialisation irreversibly afoot in the twentieth century, office workers developed into the majority of the workforce. Nowadays, chairs are ubiquitous and the amount of sedentary work we are doing requires, seemingly, the infinite evolution of the chair. Contemporary office chairs look more like machines, with levers and buttons to master their numerous functions. The chair, Vybarr Cregan-Reid claims, is the epitomised symbol of our sedentary age. Much of what we do is unimaginable without some form of chair: driving, learning, governing, writing, eating, etc.[9] The importance of chairs in most of our working environments is aptly reflected by the fact that the most comfortable chair in any office building is, by unspoken consent, reserved for the boss, the chairman—or chairwoman. And yet, the most successful of them all, at least in economic terms, is a simple monochromatic plastic chair. The Viennese coffee-house chair sold millions, the Monobloc billions. Through its cheap manufacturing costs, the Monobloc truly is a chair for everyone and completed the democratisation of the chair that the French and the Industrial revolutions had begun.

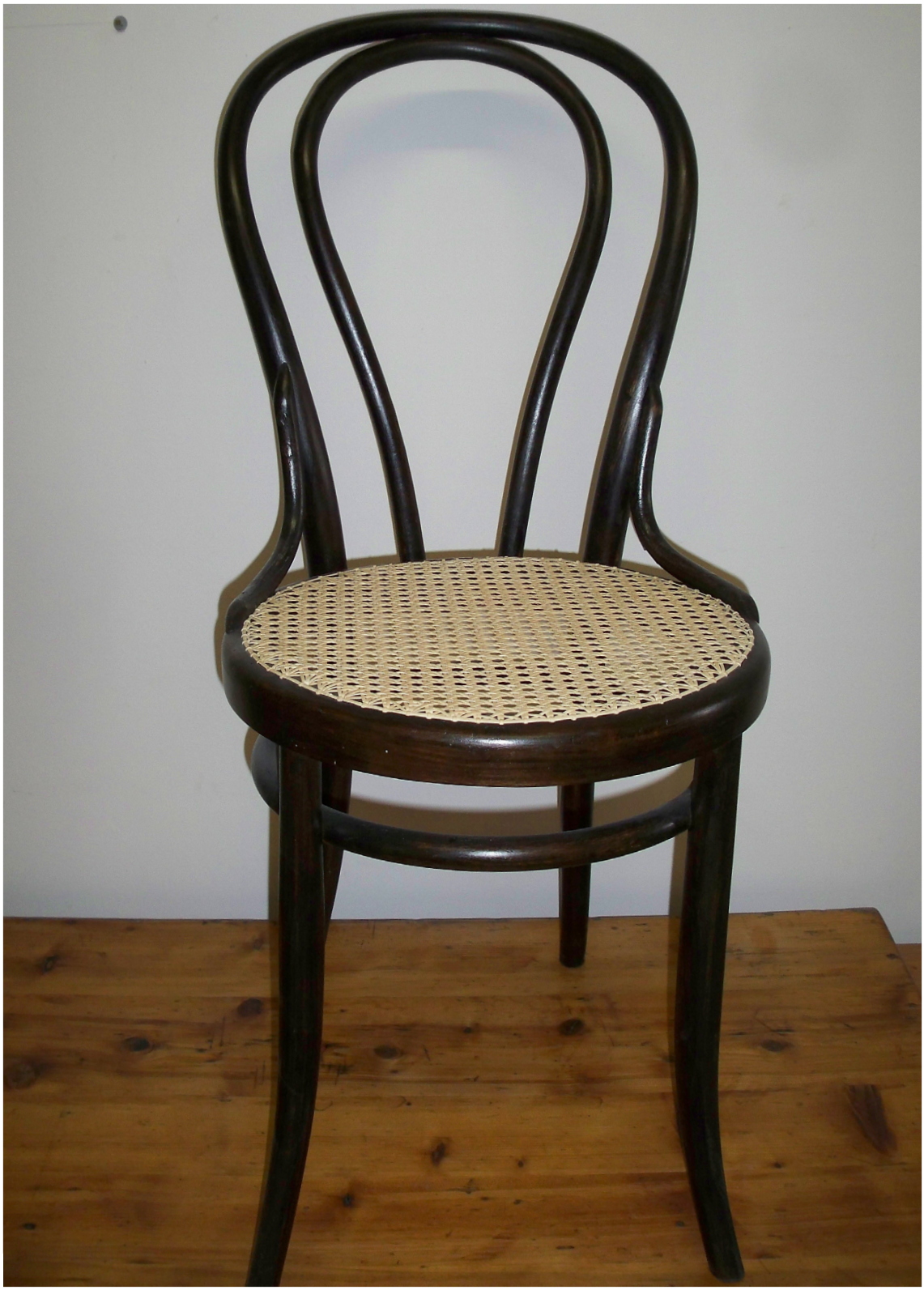

Fig. 2- Thonet no. 14
Source: Daderot / CC0

The Monobloc is manufactured from a single piece of polypropylene, heated to 220 degrees Celsius and moulded into form in less than one minute. It is produced all over the world and can be found on all five continents. Some have described the Monobloc as the world's most hated chair, seeing it as the embodiment of globalisation's many evils, drowning local cultures in uniformity. I only know of German cities, but some of them have officially banned the Monobloc from public streets for aesthetic reasons.[10] Others, however, have praised it for its durability, its utilitarian flexibility, and, obviously, its affordability. The American MIT scholar Ethan Zuckerman remarked on his blog: 'Virtually every object suggests a time and place. The Monobloc is one of the few objects I can think of that is free of any specific context'.[11] This status of the Monobloc as a 'context-free object' both facilitated its ubiquity and is determined by it. The monochromatic design, which does not necessarily have to be white but often is, makes the Monobloc a white canvas, as Jens Thiel put it, an empty vessel waiting to be filled with meaning (Schreiner).[12] According to Thiel, the Monobloc is like a white t-shirt, a basic that goes with everything, whether it is a beach esplanade, an East-Berlin allotment garden—or the war-damaged ruins of Aleppo.[13] It is the perfect symbol because it can be filled with any meaning. And it is exactly this plurality of meaning that, besides the chair commodity status, makes it utterly democratic.

If many meanings are possible, semiotician Roland Barthes explains with recourse to Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified, meanings are negotiated time and time again: symbols 'imply, underlying their signifiers, a "floating chain" of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others'.[14] Which meanings are chosen and which are ignored depends on the readers' individual backgrounds and the context of the particular situation. The white Monobloc chair is always the same

symbol, and yet it does not always communicate the same meanings. As I have explained in the beginning, a chair's meaning is always dependent also on its surroundings, such as, for instance, its spatial position. If the Monobloc is encountered outside a café at a beach esplanade, it occurs in a public space, inviting passers-by to sit down and have a drink. In an allotment garden context, the very same white plastic chair alludes to the same notions of leisure, yet this time they are much more private. In stark contrast, the Monobloc in front of the ruins of Aleppo is devoid of any sense of leisure. It is turned upside down, reflecting the war-torn state of the city by suggesting that this is not how it is supposed to be. At the same time, though, the chair seems intact: it might just be returned to its upright position, its 'natural' state, proposing that the city could do the same despite the horrors of war.

Fig. 3 - *Chair next to the Südkreuz railway station in Berlin-Schöneberg. Source: Dirk Ingo Franke / CC BY (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0)*

This process of reading, of making meaning, is differentiated by Miguel de Certeau from the act of deciphering. Whereas reading means to bring one's own culture to the object that is read, decipherment denotes the process of reading 'someone else's language on the other's terms'.[15] In this sense, for de Certeau decipherment is the subjugation to someone else's power: 'Its function is to subjugate the reader to the authority of the authored text'.[16] If decipherment is understood as the subjugation to hegemonic power by agreeing to ready-made meanings, reading becomes an act of resistance. Simultaneously,

> [r]eading emphasizes contextuality, the unique relations of this particular linguistic use to this particular contextual moment. It is thus concerned with the transient and impermanent, for relevance must be impermanent, as social allegiances change and are forged differently for different moments and purposes.[17]

De Certeau develops his argument in the context of the culture of everyday life. According to him, reading everyday objects is 'the art of making do . . . the creative, discriminating use of the resources that capitalism provides'.[18] His argument, thus, becomes a socioeconomic one: Reading everyday objects differently than intended by their (capitalist) manufacturers rejects hegemonic meanings, transforms them, and constitutes an act of resistance which de Certeau puts at the heart of the culture of everyday life—or, as other scholars have termed it, 'popular culture'.

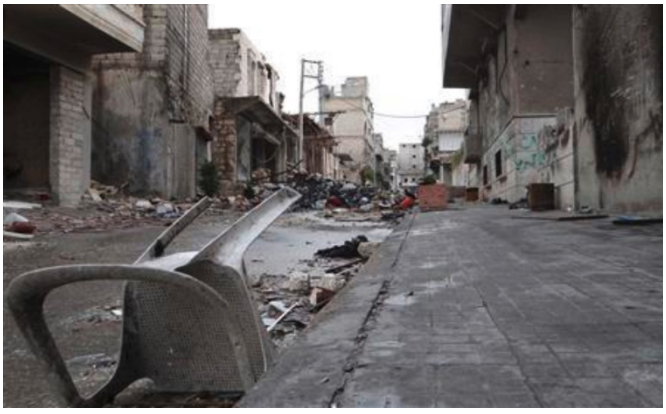

Fig. 4 - A damaged plastic chair in Aleppo

Source: REUTERS/Aaref Hretani

Roland Barthes' semiotic argument helps understand how the Monobloc facilitates the negotiation of meaning. If meaning is constructed differently in certain contexts at certain times by certain people, the Monobloc's perfect symbolical disposition becomes evident. The chair's one-piece make-up from a single material in one single colour makes it ideal for creating and negotiating meaning, for projecting meanings onto the chair. In this sense, it really becomes a white canvas. These meaning-making processes are informed by the political and socioeconomic context in which they occur. Michel Foucault has lend to Cultural Studies the term 'discourse' for describing and analysing the structure behind the production of meaning through certain practices which are influenced by their specific historical, political, social, and economic context.[19] I have already demonstrated, although briefly, how the situational context determines any particular Monobloc's meaning with the contextual examples above.

Among the Monobloc's "'floating chains" of signifieds,'[20] the array of possible meanings, ranges the cultural heritage of chairs. To sit down on a Monobloc, then, might just carry the same discursive notions of discipline that were so prominently connected with chairs in the nineteenth century. It is not rare, to give another example, to use Monoblocs for outdoor wedding ceremonies, ordering them neatly row by row. Here, the external formation of chairs clearly communicates the intended meaning which is deciphered by the wedding guests, namely to sit down and not disturb the ceremony. The chair becomes the element of control, by which authoritative power is exercised. People who, for whatever reason, might refuse to follow the unspoken request will usually be asked to please sit down and, implicitly, surrender to the discursive power that is expressed through the chair at that moment. In this situation, the disciplinary notion of the Monobloc is communicated through its utilitarian status as a chair, which in turn links back to the historical contexts in which

chairs were used as a disciplinary tool, such as at school or at the domestic dinner table. In this specific context of a wedding, the discourse in this case, the historical meaning is represented through the chair and reinforced by it. It is taken from the past and anchored in the particular moment through and by the Monoblocs.

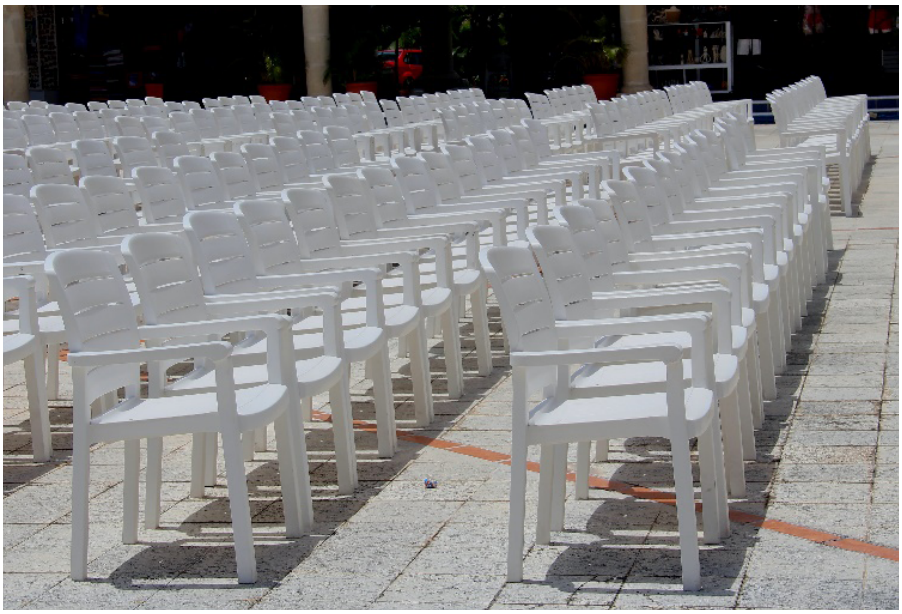

Fig. 5 - Rows of plastic chairs
Source: Oudom Pravat / CC0

Now perhaps has come the time to briefly acknowledge that the historical context of chairs and the concomitant meanings that are carried by a diachronic perspective on chairs is an inherently western perspective. Scholars researching on chairs and practices of sitting have pointed out that human cultures have split into chair-sitting and floor-sitting cultures as well as cultures that mix the two approaches.[21] While eastern cultures predominantly lean towards floor-sitting cultures, sitting on chairs is a practice shaped by the global West, particularly Europe and the American North. Consequently, the Monobloc has also acquired the notion of western commodification culture and its inexpensive production process facilitates the chair's widespread distribution. Unifying the western cultural history of chairs and low costs, purchasing a Monobloc has become a means of participating in western

consumer culture in the global East and South, even though Monoblocs are manufactured all over the world. The appropriation of western, particularly American, consumer culture in other parts of the world is a way of speaking back to their own authorities, a way of 'making do' as de Certeau put it. John Fiske has expanded de Certeau's concept of cultural appropriation as 'the art of making do' by identifying the people's meaning-making processes as a form of resisting to what Fiske calls 'the power-bloc'.[22] In his line of argument, these popular meaning-making processes at a whole constitute 'popular culture':

> Popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant. Popular culture is made from within and below, not imposed from without or above as mass cultural theorists would have it. There is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control, that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces. Popular culture is always a culture of conflict, it always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interest of the subordinate and that are not preferred by the dominant ideology.[23]

Therefore, sitting on a Monobloc in regions where it is customary to sit on the floor might either be regarded as further 'McDonaldisation' of global culture—or, if one frees oneself from such a judgemental position, as precisely such an act of resistance which emphasises individual freedom of choice over hegemonic ideological control.

Indubitably, the Monobloc can be positioned exactly at the heart of this struggle over meaning. Itself a human artefact, the Monobloc chair is embedded in a complicated web of human meanings which are constantly negotiated in different contexts at different times. On the one hand, the diachronic explorations of chairs helps us understand the notions of transcendence, power, and difference of the individual, which dominated in prehistoric and medieval times. When the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution

first removed the aristocratic and clerical privilege of sitting on chairs and provided the means of manufacturing chairs on a large scale, it acquired the meaning of disciplining the body during the Enlightenment period. On the other hand, the Monobloc's single-material, seamless form, and monochrome—often white—colouring facilitate its status as a 'white canvas' onto which any meaning can be 'painted', to stay with the metaphor. The construction of the Monobloc's meaning thus takes place within these diachronic and synchronic socioeconomic and political contexts which evolve around questions of power, hegemonic control through discipline, and empowerment through resistance. Looking at these contexts and the discourses surrounding them excavates precisely which meaning of the Monobloc among this ever-flowing chain of signifiers is anchored by different communities at different points in time in different parts of the world.

While the Monobloc may carry the disciplinary notions that pertained to chairs since the enlightenment period, as in the example of the wedding, its flexibility allows it to assume a number of meanings. It provides for people around the globe an opportunity to make their own meaning by using the chair, liberating the process of meaning-making altogether. As I have shown any reading of the Monobloc is dependent on the context and discourse surrounding its use. However, the simple fact that it can be used, and thus read, in so many different contexts and discourses leads me to think that the chair is a democratic symbol of human meaning-making. Ultimately, it is the Monobloc's use as an artefact of commodification to speak back to hegemonic ideologies in particular that leads me to suggest that the Monobloc can be regarded as democratising the practice of sitting by empowering its occupant.

NOTES

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