

## *The Lesson of Rancière*

F.W.J. Schelling's statement, 'The beginning is the negation of that which begins with it', perfectly fits the itinerary of Jacques Rancière who first appeared on the philosophical scene in the early 1960s as a young Althusserian, one of the contributors (together with Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet and Pierre Macherey) to the path-breaking collective volume *Lire le Capital* from 1965, which, with Althusser's *Pour Marx*, defined the field of 'structuralist Marxism'. However, one did not have to wait long for Rancière's unique voice to explode in a thunder which rocked the Althusserian scene: in 1974, he published *La Leçon d'Althusser (The Lesson of Althusser)*, a ferocious critical examination of Althusserian structuralist Marxism with its rigid distinction between scientific theory and ideology and its distrust towards any form of spontaneous popular movement which was immediately decried as a form of bourgeois humanism. Against this theoreticist elitism, this insistence on the gap which forever separates the universe of scientific cognition from that of ideological (mis)recognition in which the common masses are immersed, against this stance, which allows theoreticians to 'speak for' the masses, to know the truth about them, Rancière endeavours again and again to elaborate the contours of those magic, violently poetic moments of political subjectivization in which the excluded ('lower classes') put forward their claim to speak for themselves, to effectuate a change in the global perception of social space, so that their claims would have a legitimate place in it.

How, for Rancière, did politics proper begin? With the emergence of the *dēmos* as an active agent within the Greek *polis*, with the emergence of a group which, although without any fixed place in the social edifice (or, at best, occupying a subordinate place), demanded to be included in the public sphere, to be heard on equal footing with the ruling oligarchy or aristocracy, i.e. recognized as a partner in political dialogue and the exercise of power. As Rancière emphasizes against Habermas, political struggle proper is therefore not a rational

debate between multiple interests, but, simultaneously, the struggle for one's voice to be heard and recognized as the voice of a legitimate partner: when the 'excluded', from the Greek *dēmos* to Polish workers, protested against the ruling elite (the aristocracy or the *nomenklatura*), the true stakes were not only their explicit demands (for higher wages, work conditions, etc.), but their very right to be heard and recognized as an equal partner in the debate (in Poland, the *nomenklatura* lost the moment it had to accept Solidarity as an equal partner). Furthermore, in protesting the wrong (*le tort*) they suffered, they also presented themselves as the immediate embodiment of society as such, as the stand-in for the Whole of Society in its universality, against the particular power-interests of the aristocracy or oligarchy ('we – the "nothing", not counted in the order – are the people, we are All against others who stand only for their particular privileged interests').

Politics proper thus always involves a kind of short-circuit between the Universal and the Particular: the paradox of a singular which appears as a stand-in for the Universal, destabilizing the 'natural' functional order of relations in the social body. The political conflict resides in the tension between the structured social body where each part has its place – what Rancière calls politics as police in the most elementary sense of maintaining social order – and 'the part with no part' which unsettles this order on account of the empty principle of universality, of what Étienne Balibar calls *égaliberté*, the principled equality-in-freedom of all men qua speaking beings. This identification of the non-part with the Whole, of the part of society with no properly defined place within it (or resisting the allocated subordinate place within it) with the Universal, is the elementary gesture of politicization, discernible in all great democratic events, from the French Revolution (in which *le troisième état* proclaimed itself identical to the Nation as such against the aristocracy and the clergy) to the demise of ex-European Socialism (in which the dissident Forum proclaimed itself representative of the entire society against the Party *nomenklatura*). In this precise sense, politics and democracy are synonymous: the basic aim of antidemocratic politics always – and by definition – is and was depoliticization, i.e. the unconditional demand that 'things should return to normal', with each individual doing his or her particular job. Rancière, of course, emphasizes how the line of separation between the

police and politics proper is always blurred and contested; say, in the Marxist tradition, 'proletariat' can be read as the subjectivization of the 'part of no part' elevating its injustice to the ultimate test of universality, and, simultaneously, as the operator which will bring about the establishment of a post-political rational society. Our European tradition contains a series of disavowals of this political moment, of the proper logic of political conflict; Rancière developed them in *La Méésentente* (1995), the masterpiece of his political thought:

- archi-politics: the 'communitarian' attempts to define a traditional close, organically structured homogeneous social space which allows for no void in which the political moment-event can emerge;
- para-politics: the attempt to depoliticize politics (to translate it into the police-logic): one accepts the political conflict, but reformulates it into a competition, within the representational space, between acknowledged parties/agents, for the (temporary) occupation of the place of executive power. Habermasian or Rawlsian ethics are perhaps the last philosophical vestiges of this attitude: the attempt to de-antagonize politics by way of formulating the clear rules to be obeyed so that the agonistic procedure of litigation does not explode into politics proper;
- Marxist (or Utopian Socialist) meta-politics: the political conflict is fully asserted, as a shadow-theatre in which processes – whose proper place is on Another Scene (the scene of economic infrastructure) – are played out; the ultimate goal of 'true' politics is thus its self-cancellation, the transformation of the 'administration of people' into the 'administration of things' within a fully self-transparent rational order of collective Will;
- and, one is tempted to supplement Rancière, the most cunning and radical version of this disavowal is ultra-politics, the attempt to depoliticize conflict by way of bringing it to an extreme via the direct militarization of politics: the 'foreclosed' political returns in the real, in the guise of the attempt to resolve the deadlock of political conflict, of *mésentente*, by its false radicalization, i.e. by way of reformulating it as a war between 'Us' and 'Them', our Enemy, where there is no common ground for symbolic conflict.

What we have in all four cases – archi-, para-, meta- and ultra-politics – is thus an attempt to gentrify the properly traumatic dimension of the political: something emerged in ancient Greece under the name of *polis* demanding its rights, and, from the very beginning (i.e. from Plato's *Republic*) to the recent revival of liberal political thought, 'political philosophy' has been an attempt to suspend the destabilizing potential of the political, to disavow and/or regulate it in one way or another: bringing about a return to a pre-political social body, fixing the rules of political competition, etc. 'Political philosophy' is thus, in all its different shapes, a kind of 'defence-formation', and, perhaps, its typology could be established via reference to the different modalities of defence against some traumatic experience in psychoanalysis. In contrast to these four versions, today's 'postmodern' post-politics opens up a new field which involves a stronger negation of politics: it no longer merely 'represses' it, trying to contain it and to pacify the 'returns of the repressed', but much more effectively 'forecloses' it, so that the postmodern forms of ethnic violence, with their 'irrational' excessive character, are no longer simple 'returns of the repressed', but rather present the case of the foreclosed (from the Symbolic) which, as we know from Lacan, returns in the Real.

In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties who compete for power is replaced by a collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists...) and liberal multiculturalists; via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus. The political (the space of litigation in which the excluded can protest the wrong/injustice done to them), foreclosed from the symbolic then returns in the real, in the form of racism. It is crucial to perceive how 'postmodern racism' emerges as the ultimate consequence of the post-political suspension of the political in the reduction of the state to a mere police agent servicing the (consensually established) needs of the market forces and multiculturalist tolerant humanitarianism: the 'foreigner', whose status is never properly regulated, is the indivisible remainder of the transformation of democratic political struggle into the post-political procedure of negotiation and multiculturalist policing. Instead of the political subject 'working class' demanding its universal rights, we get, on the one hand, the multi-

plicity of particular social strata or groups, each with its problems (the dwindling need for manual workers, etc.), and, on the other hand, the immigrant, more and more prevented from politicizing his predicament of exclusion.

Rancière is right to emphasize how it is against this background that one should interpret the fascination of 'public opinion' with the unique event of the Holocaust: the reference to the Holocaust as the ultimate, unthinkable, apolitical crime, as the Evil so radical that it cannot be politicized (accounted for by a political dynamic), serves as the operator which allows us to depoliticize the social sphere, to warn against the presumption of politicization. The Holocaust is the name for the unthinkable apolitical excess of politics itself: it compels us to subordinate politics to some more fundamental ethics. The Otherness excluded from the consensual domain of tolerant/rational post-political negotiation and administration returns in the guise of inexplicable pure Evil. What defines postmodern 'post-politics' is thus the secret solidarity between its two opposed Janus faces: on the one hand, the replacement of politics proper by depoliticized 'humanitarian' operations, on the other hand, the violent outbursts of depoliticized 'pure Evil' in the guise of 'excessive' ethnic or religious fundamentalist violence. In short, what Rancière proposes here is a new version of the old Hegelian motto 'Evil resides in the gaze itself which perceives the object as Evil': the contemporary figure of Evil, too 'strong' to be accessible to political analysis (the Holocaust, etc.), appears as such only to the gaze which constitutes it as such (as depoliticized).

In Rancière's diagnosis, today's hegemonic tendency towards post-politics thus compels us to reassert the political in its key dimension: in this, he belongs to the field one is tempted to define as 'post-Althusserian': authors like Balibar, Alain Badiou, up to Ernesto Laclau, whose starting position was close to Althusser. The first thing to note here is how they are all opposed to the most elaborated 'formal' theory of democracy in contemporary French thought, that of Claude Lefort. In an explicit reference to Lacanian theory, Lefort conceptualized the democratic space as sustained by the gap between the Real and the Symbolic: in a democracy, *the place of Power is structurally empty*, nobody has the 'natural' right to occupy it, those who exert power can do so only temporarily and should not ever coalesce

with its place. The elegance of this theory is that, in the same way that Kant rejected the opposition between the traditional ethics of a transcendent substantial Good and the utilitarian grounding of ethics in the individual's contingent empirical interests by way of proposing a purely formal notion of ethical duty, Lefort overcomes the opposition between the Rousseauian 'substantialist' notion of democracy as expressing *la volonté générale* and the liberal notion of democracy as the space of negotiated settlement between the plurality of individual interests, by way of proposing a purely 'formal' notion of democracy. So while Lefort proposes a Kantian transcendental notion of political democracy, the 'post-Althusserians' insist that, within the multitude of real political agents, there is a privileged One, the 'supernumerary' which occupies the place of the 'symptomal torsion' of the whole and thus allows us access to its truth – the pure universal form is linked by a kind of umbilical cord to a 'pathological' element which does not fit into the social Whole.

However, even within this 'post-Althusserian' field, there are considerable differences. While Rancière remains faithful to the populist-democratic impulse, Alain Badiou (whose notion of the 'supernumerary' as the site of the political is very close to Rancière's notion of the 'part with no part') opts for a more 'Platonic' form of politics grounded in the universal form-of-thought. While all democratic Leftists venerate Rosa Luxemburg's famous 'Freedom is freedom for those who think differently', Badiou provokes us to shift the accent from 'differently' to 'think': 'Freedom is freedom for those who think differently' – ONLY for those who REALLY THINK, even if differently, not for those who just blindly (unthinkingly) act out their opinions... In his famous short poem 'The Solution' from 1953 (published in 1956), Brecht mocks the arrogance of the Communist *nomenklatura* when faced with the workers' revolt: 'Would it not be easier for the government to dissolve the people and elect another?' However, this poem is not only politically opportunistic, the obverse of his letter of solidarity with the East German Communist regime published in *Neues Deutschland* – to put it brutally, Brecht wanted to cover both his flanks, to profess his support for the regime as well as to hint at his solidarity with the workers, so that whoever won, he would be on the winning side – but also simply *wrong* in the theoretico-

political sense: one should bravely admit that it effectively IS a duty – THE duty even – of a revolutionary party to 'dissolve the people and elect another', i.e. to bring about the transubstantiation of the 'old' opportunistic people (the inert 'crowd') into a revolutionary body aware of its historical task. Far from being an easy task, to 'dissolve the people and elect another' is the most difficult of all...

In spite of these differences, there is a feature that unites all the post-Althusserian partisans of 'pure politics': what they oppose to today's post-politics is more Jacobin than Marxist, i.e. it shares with its great opponent, Anglo-Saxon Cultural Studies and their focus on the struggles for recognition, the degradation of the sphere of economy. That is to say, what all the new French (or French oriented) theories of the Political, from Balibar through Rancière and Badiou to Laclau and Mouffe, aim at is – to put it in traditional philosophical terms – the reduction of the sphere of economy (of material production) to an 'ontic' sphere deprived of 'ontological' dignity. Within this horizon, there is simply no place for the Marxian 'critique of political economy': the structure of the universe of commodities and capital in Marx's *Capital* is NOT just that of a limited empirical sphere, but a kind of socio-transcendental *a priori*, the matrix which generates the totality of social and political relations.

The relationship between economy and politics is ultimately that of the well-known visual paradox of the 'two faces or a vase': one either sees the two faces or a vase, never both of them – one has to make a choice. In the same way, one either focuses on the political, and the domain of economy is reduced to the empirical 'servicing of goods', or one focuses on economy, and politics is reduced to a theatre of appearances, to a passing phenomenon which will disappear with the arrival of the developed Communist (or technocratic) society, in which, as Engels already put it, the 'administration of people' will vanish in the 'administration of things'. The 'political' critique of Marxism (the claim that, when one reduces politics to a 'formal' expression of some underlying 'objective' socio-economic process, one loses the openness and contingency constitutive of the political field proper) should thus be supplemented by its obverse: the field of economy is IN ITS VERY FORM irreducible to politics – this level of the FORM of economy (of economy as the determining FORM of the social) is what French

'political post-Marxists' miss when they reduce economy to one of the positive social spheres.

In spite of this critical point, Rancière's theory provides the clearest articulation of the motto which appeared at the demonstrations of the French jobless movement in the mid-90s: *we're not a surplus, we're a plus*. Those who, in the eyes of the administrative power, are perceived as 'a surplus' (laid off, redundant, reduced to silence in a society that subtracted the jobless from the public accounts, that made them into a kind of residue – invisible, inconceivable except as a statistic under a negative sign), should impose themselves as the embodiment of society as such – how? It is here that we encounter the second great breakthrough of Rancière articulated in *Le Partage du sensible*: the *aestheticization of politics*, the assertion of the aesthetic dimension as INHERENT in any radical emancipatory politics. This choice, although grounded in the long French tradition of radical political spectacle, goes against the grain of the predominant notion which sees the main root of Fascism in the elevation of the social body into an aesthetic-organic Whole.

It is not only that, apart from being a political theorist, Rancière wrote a series of outstanding texts on art, especially on cinema – the shift from the political to the aesthetic is inherent in the political itself. The aesthetic metaphor in which a particular element stands for the Universal, is enacted in the properly political short-circuit in which a particular demand stands for the universal gesture of rejecting the power that be. Say, when people strike against a particular measure (new tax regulation, etc.), the true aim of the strike is never just this particular measure – which is why, if those in power give way too fast and repeal this measure, people feel frustrated, since, although their demand was met, they were deprived of what they were really aiming at. And what about the ideological struggle in which a universal conceptual position is always 'schematized' in the Kantian sense of the term, translated into a specific impressive set of images? Recall how, a decade ago, in the UK, the figure of the unemployed single mother was elevated by the conservative media into the cause of all social evils: there is a budget deficit because too much money is spent on supporting single mothers; there is juvenile delinquency because single mothers do not properly educate their offspring... Or recall how the anti-abortion campaigns

as a rule put forward the image of a rich career woman neglecting her maternal mission – in blatant contrast to the fact that many more abortions are performed on working-class women who already have many children. These poetic displacements and condensations are not just secondary illustrations of an underlying ideological struggle, but the very terrain of this struggle. If what Rancière refers to as the police-aspect of the political, the rational administration and control of social processes, focuses on the clear categorization of every individual, of every 'visible' social unit, then disturbing such orders of the visible and proposing different lateral links of the visible, unexpected short-circuits, etc., is the elementary form of resistance.

On a more general level, the lesson of Rancière is that one should be careful not to succumb to the liberal temptation of condemning all collective artistic performances as inherently 'totalitarian'. Both the Thingspiel in the early Nazi years and Bertolt Brecht's 'learning plays / *Lehrstueckel*' involved a mass ideologico-aesthetic experience (of songs, speeches and acts) in which spectators themselves served as actors – does this mean that the Left in the 30s participated in the same 'proto-Fascist' totalitarian experience of the 'regressive' immersion into pre-individual community as Nazism (the thesis of, among others, Siegfried Kracauer)? If not, does the difference reside in the fact that the Nazi Thingspiel staged a pathetic-emotional immersion, while Brecht aimed at a distanced, self-observing, reflected process of learning? However, is this standard Brechtian opposition of emotional immersion and reflexive distance sufficient? Let us recall the staged performance of 'Storming the Winter Palace' in Petrograd, on the third anniversary of the October Revolution, on the 7th of November, 1920. Tens of thousands of workers, soldiers, students, and artists worked round the clock, living on kasha (the tasteless wheat porridge), tea, and frozen apples, and preparing the performance at the very place where the event 'really took place' three years earlier; their work was coordinated by the Army officers, as well as by the avant-garde artists, musicians, and directors, from Malevich to Meyerhold. Although this was acting and not 'reality', the soldiers and sailors were playing themselves – many of them not only actually participated in the events of 1917, but were also simultaneously involved in the real battles of the Civil War that were raging in the near vicinity of Petrograd, a city

under siege and suffering from severe food shortages. A contemporary commented on the performance: 'The future historian will record how, throughout one of the bloodiest and most brutal revolutions, all of Russia was acting'; and the formalist theoretician Viktor Shklovski noted that 'some kind of elemental process is taking place where the living fabric of life is being transformed into the theatrical'.

Another popular topic of this kind of analysis is the allegedly 'proto-Fascist' character of the mass choreography displaying disciplined movements of thousands of bodies (parades, mass performances in stadiums, etc.); if one also finds this in Socialism, one immediately draws the conclusion about a 'deeper solidarity' between the two 'totalitarianisms'. Such a procedure, the very prototype of ideological liberalism, misses the point: not only are such mass performances not inherently Fascist; they are not even 'neutral', waiting to be appropriated by Left or Right – it was Nazism that stole them and appropriated them from the workers' movement, their original site of birth. None of the 'proto-Fascist' elements is *per se* Fascist, what makes them 'Fascist' is only their specific articulation – or, to put it in Stephen Jay Gould's terms, all these elements are 'ex-apted' by Fascism. In other words, there is no 'Fascism *avant la lettre*', because *it is the letter itself (the nomination) which makes out of the bundle of elements Fascism proper*.

Along the same lines, one should radically reject the notion that discipline (from self-control to bodily training) is a 'proto-Fascist' feature – the very predicate 'proto-Fascist' should be abandoned: it is the exemplary case of a pseudo-concept whose function is to block conceptual analysis. When we say that the organized spectacle of thousands of bodies (or, say, the admiration of sports which demand high effort and self-control like mountain climbing) is 'proro-Fascist', we say strictly nothing, we just express a vague association which masks our ignorance. So when, three decades ago, Kung Fu films were popular (Bruce Lee, etc.), was it not obvious that we were dealing with a genuine working class ideology of youngsters whose only means of success was the disciplinary training of their only possession, their bodies? Spontaneity and the 'let it go' attitude of indulging in excessive freedoms belong to those who have the means to afford it – those who have nothing have only their discipline. The 'bad' bodily discipline, if

there is one, is not collective training, but, rather, jogging and body-building as part of the New Age myth of the realization of the Self's inner potentials – no wonder that the obsession with one's body is an almost obligatory part of the passage of ex-Leftist radicals into the 'maturity' of pragmatic politics: from Jane Fonda to Joschka Fischer, the 'period of latency' between the two phases was marked by the focus on one's own body.

It is often claimed that, in his passionate advocacy of the aesthetic dimension as inherent in the political, Rancière nostalgically longs for the nineteenth-century populist rebellions whose era is definitely gone – however, is it really? Is not precisely the 'postmodern' politics of resistance permeated with aesthetic phenomena, from body-piercing and cross-dressing to public spectacles? Does not the curious phenomenon of 'flash mobs' stand for the aesthetico-political protest at its purest, reduced to its minimal frame? People show up at an assigned place at a certain time, perform some brief (and usually trivial or ridiculous) acts, and then disperse again – no wonder flash mobs are described as being urban poetry with no real purpose. Nor to mention, of course, cyberspace which abounds with possibilities of playing with multiple (dis)identifications and lateral connections subverting the established social networks... So, far from standing for a nostalgic attachment to a populist past lost by our entry into the global post-industrial society, Rancière's thought is today more actual than ever: in our time of the disorientation of the Left, his writings offer one of the few consistent conceptualizations of *how we are to continue to resist*.