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By Melanie Gilligan

Jacques Ranciere gave a talk on 23 October at Goldsmiths College, giving a handful of pre-selected students and researchers a chance to question him closely on his theory of the politics of aesthetics. Melanie Gilligan was one of these interlocutors, asking the question published below.

Sadly, rather than tackling the question head-on, Ranciere seemed to digress into a refutation of the universal applicability of post-autonomist theories of immaterial labour and the weightless economy - something briefly touched on, but certainly not prescribed by Melanie's question. Rather than setting out how art and aesthetic 'redistributions' and 'reorderings' of the sensible differ from capitalism's constant drive to produce new tastes and desires, and how this gives agency to those excluded from the dominant order of sense/politics, he uttered a few words on the excess 'capacity' of the social that is never exhausted by capital. As important and hopeful as this idea of capacity is, it still didn't address the overlaps between capitalist and aesthetic sensual revolutions. Would be good to know what any other Ranciere fanciers out there think.

You describe politics as a temporary disruption of the 'distribution of the sensible', which you define as the established social order 'determining what presents itself to sense experience' - in other words, what can be sensed, thought and felt. Politics happens when those who have been afforded no part in this distribution, 'the part of no part', make themselves perceptible, and in so doing reconfigure the field of the sensible, an organisation which is never absolute. You identify various examples of such re-orderings, for instance in the 19th c, worker-intellectuals read and wrote 'high' literature instead of militant or popular forms. This dissolved the unitary identities allotted to them in the sensible order (i.e. - the worker as he who has no time to do anything but his own work) and exercised what you have called 'the power to declassify' (*On the Shores of Politics*). It is easy to see how, by extension, this relates to your conception of politics as 'a theatrical and artificial sphere' (*L'Entretien avec Jacques Ranciere*, *Dissonance no.1*) where the part of no part can use appearances and dissimulation to shift and confuse roles.

However, politics as disruption of the sensible order finds a parallel in commerce - particularly in the present - where profits are increasingly made through reordering and subverting existing visual, affective and semiotic codes. An obvious example is the disruptive frisson by which advertising and media thrive, but the same logic is manifest in fields as diverse as urban planning, finance and military strategy (for example, the US' 'shock and awe' strategy or the Israeli army's 'Situationist' 'disorientation' of civilian populations). In deregulated and decentralized late-capitalism, declassifications and re-articulations of the established order of representation are the norm not the exception. Yet, before Fordism, let alone post-Fordism, Marx had already described capitalism as a process that dramatically reconfigures the organisation of life - i.e. his statement in *The Communist Manifesto* that 'all that is solid melts into air'.

In his book *Transcritique*, Kojin Karatani extrapolates from Marx to say that surplus value is made through the exchange between different value systems. For instance, industrial capital creates surplus value by 'incessantly producing new value systems temporally - that is, with technological innovation'. As Karatani puts it, 'Capital has to discover and create these differences everyday'. We could add that this extends far beyond industrial production to the differentiation of new markets, new desires, and new subjective dispositions. Creating the differences integral to the reproduction of capital requires re-organising the field of experience. The current 'established order' constantly undergoes such re-orderings, yet inequality in wealth and privilege is unaffected and continues to worsen. These redistributions effected by capital can make visible or further obscure those who are excluded from the

sensible order – i.e. the working-class as part of no part, immigrant laborers, the impoverished inhabitants of the third world slums, for instance. However, without a change in economic conditions, which are not reducible to economic science as a form of ‘political representation’ (*The Philosopher and His Poor*), it is difficult to see how the excluded can actually stage a disordering of roles to significant effect without being condemned to enact the infinite repetition of these performances. What distinguishes the politics you describe from the re-orderings prevalent in commerce today? Would you say that economic conditions could only change through such reorganisations of the sensible order and if so, how can the part of no part create consequential disturbances when the current distribution (in so far as it is determined by capital) relies on such re-orderings?

Likewise, the theatrical and artificial qualities you have identified in politics resemble what contemporary business and political theorists alike have identified as a generalized condition of performativity in contemporary labour – from the standardization of ‘performance’ in the work place to the employee-actors of Pine and Gilmore’s ‘experience economy’ to Paolo Virno’s identification of the qualities which once defined performance and politics – that is communication, improvisation, creating no finished product – in labour. Virno asserts that politics today seems ‘in a disastrous way, like some superfluous duplication of the experience of labor’. What are the advantages to thinking politics in terms of artifice and theatricality when such a notion already permeates the spectrum of contemporary labour and is, by some accounts, hindering the possibility of politics?

– Melanie Gilligan