

Politics of Representation: Performing the People and Avant-garde Practices

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Historically, the question of the emancipation of the masses through the development of collective power can be seen through two ideas: the communist and the democratic one. Jacques Rancière conducted a critique of both instances in an attempt to bring about the third one, which is based on equality. Yet this kind of equality is a radical one and does not depend on education or wealth.

According to him, knowledge is not a set of acknowledges, but a mixture of occupied positions that are exercised through practice.¹ Rancière does not find the example for this in life but in art. He believes that the paradox of the theater audience is in the fact that there is no theatre without spectators, and that the spectator (the viewer), for that very reason, is not separated from the skills and knowledge of the performance

capabilities. Through the idea that “the theatre remains the only place for facing the audience with itself as a collective,”² Rancière is trying to draw attention to the theatre as a representative of the community that is opposed to the trap of representation and that is formed in a way of self-presence.

“Theatre is an exemplary community form. It involves an idea of community as self-presence, in contrast to the distance of representation. Since German Romanticism, thinking about theatre has been associated with this idea of the living community. Theatre emerged as a form of aesthetic constitution – sensible constitution – of the community. By that I mean the community as a way of occupying a place and a time, as the body in action as opposed to a mere apparatus of laws; a set of perceptions, gestures and attitudes that precede and pre-form laws and political institution.”³

Considering Guy Debord’s takes on the society of the spectacle⁴, mainly the idea of spectacle as an empire of seeing, the exterior where a man renounces control over himself, theatre as a live collective to Rancière represents a counterpoint to the illusion of mimesis, thus the stolen essence in the world of spectacle. In theatre, the viewer creates, in a way, his own poem “and he only feels and understands while doing so”⁵, and similarly that is also the case with actors, dramatists, directors, dancers and performers. Rancière’s politics of radical equality presumes a detachment from the perception of a schizophrenic world torn apart by keepers of knowledge, specialists and experts on one hand, and a stupefied mass of uneducated and ignorant individuals on the other – a detachment from the law of domination in the name of human autonomy and emancipation, thus in the name of communal participation in the communal world. This is the idea of wholeness, potentialities and creation, opposed to any form of totalitarianism. In that sense (although he is very close to the French left) Rancière is very critical of communism. Stating “the less workers, the more Communism.”⁶ Rancière points out that the true paradox of Communism is that it was conceived as a part of the leader’s principle, originally created by philosophers such as Plato.⁷ For Rancière, the Communist elites, since they have a “golden soul”, are the only ones who are capable of living in Communism. On the other hand, “Ordinary, dirty people can only be capitalists. Workers must live as capitalists, even when they don’t have the capital, and only those who are the elite are able to live as communist equal people.”⁸

According to Rancière, this is a perverse idea that still survives in the idea of the avant-garde, precisely in the idea of communists as avant-garde that will free the working class from the illusions of everyday life etc. Certainly it is a fact that in historical Communism there were examples of a bureaucratization of the party, a division of minor circles of

leaders from common members of the party and the working class in general, the so called “new class”. But, neither the historical nor the theoretical Communism can be reduced to this phenomenon. Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao – all of them pledge for less distance, in theory and practice, between the proletariat and its avant-garde. Lenin’s famous thought on the party is that it should be one step ahead of the proletarian masses. It has to be ahead, because the masses are not emancipated enough in their minds; they cannot be it because of their class position in the social division of labour. In the class society (that we live in today, too), so called intellectual work is a privilege of the middle and upper class. For that reason, it was necessary for the party to be created as an avant-garde of the proletariat. But, the party had to remain *only one step* ahead, in order to remain its avant-garde and not alienate itself from it.

Therefore, the avant-garde is composed of individuals who were recruited, and it seems that it’s the only way, from what could be called in Marxist words petty bourgeoisie. A great majority of party leaders, theorists and artists came precisely from this class. But, they abandoned the interests of the ruling class and embraced the political position of the proletarian class and its interests. This made them into the most progressive and outstanding part of the proletariat, not some other, particular class, as interpreted by Rancière. They too understood the avant-garde nature of the party only as a *transitioning moment* while preparing for the future classless society, which will enable everyone to truly step out with all of their “intelligence capacity”. The oppressed should be emancipated with the help of the party and enabled to lead themselves, as their freedom was determined, but not given for granted.

However, this polemic may serve as a starting point for some more general and I would say more urgent questions concerning the participation as a necessary condition to representational and direct democracy. In fact, starting from the historical determination of the avant-garde as a (military) forefront that informs about the position of the enemy, it would be crucial to understand *if the exploited ones really need this viewpoint or if it is safe to think that they over-view the exploitation well and enough on their own?*⁹

First of all, the avant-garde is not an eternal norm as Rancière sees it, something that is defined by its representatives in a way that is historically unsustainable. The avant-garde is rather a historical fact that serves as an induction. There is a need here to accentuate that in every moment in history, a clear distinction between those who are more and those who are less aware of their own and general subordination can be made. Do oppressed masses produce awareness (and highly theoretically articulated awareness) of their subordination and

the ways of overcoming it on their own? Or, does it come to them from outside, from members of different classes and intelligence who, following the logic of their class position, are in the better place for perceiving and conceptually articulating sources of social subordination and forms of its termination, that is – emancipation?

Or, more explicitly, why do workers and farmers in Serbia, for example, live in poor and humiliating conditions if they are aware of what is good and what is bad for them? Why don't they rebel against these living conditions? Why are the attempts of resistance to privatization so rare and weak, when it leaves huge working masses without basic security in life? Why does a great deal of workers still believe blindly in the idea that privatization will save them, the one that will be "fair", even though such does not exist? Why are their trade-unions so weak and defensive, and strive to attain a peaceful dialogue with the exploiters (the government and the owners), when it is clear from the beginning who will win that fight due to stronger elements of power?

Karl Marx and Marxism favoured the idea of the workers' revolution, which Rancière for some reason dismisses. Secondly, even if the will for domination was the only motive for the avant-garde, that only explains why it stands by the working masses, but it does not explain why the masses stand by it. It is hard to believe that these masses only changed their ruler after the revolution. They also changed considerably the character of the authority, because the new authority was more "close to them", to their interests, certainly more than the previous one.

Thirdly, the matter of social division remains unresolved. Although Rancière denies a division between bourgeoisie and proletariat today we can still make a distinction, in liberal democracy, between, for example, democratic oligarchy and those who, as Rancière, disapprove of it at least on an intellectual level. However, this way of pointing out things would only benefit the avant-garde. Furthermore, very severe criticism of Jacques Rancière's work and the postmodern inheritance as such, that I want to relate to, came from the American art theoretician Hal Foster.¹⁰ Foster determined that the possibilities of a critique historically gradually disappear and vanish. First of all the judgment¹¹ is dismissed, as a moral position that provides a standpoint for critical observation, then the authority¹² is dismissed, as a sort of critical privilege that enables a critic to speak in the name of others, and in the end the distance, which is so distinctive for the critical position and provides an independent point of observation for practice or events, is well shaken.

As Foster points out, these accusations against critique (avant-garde) are led by two ideas. The first one is that the critic is an

ideological patron who dislocates a certain group of people or a class that he represents from his critical position ¹³, and the second one is that a critical discourse is predominantly perceived as a scientific one, which provides it with a particular legitimacy in the matters of truth, so we cannot see the thing that potentially remains hidden (ideology). ¹⁴ According to Foster, there are two more ideas that helped the process of extracting legitimacy out of the critical position in a historically-philosophical sense. The first one is the critique of representation that suppressed the value of truth as such, encouraging moral indifference and political nihilism. The second one is the critique of the subject based on the critique of identity as social construction, encouraging consumerism of positions of subject -- identities. ¹⁵ As we can see, this rough division illustrates how postmodernism is seen today.

Postmodernism is closely associated with neoliberal capitalism, thus, postmodernism can be interpreted as a culture of liberal capitalism referring to the deregulation of culture that finds its match in the deregulation of economy. ¹⁶ Refusing critique and the critical seems to have led to a position that has nothing to offer, with no possibility to criticize. In the field of theory the "distribution of sensible" ¹⁷ is offered instead, "general intellect" ¹⁸, "art in gaseous condition" ¹⁹, glorifying the aesthetic... The art world of today is being cluttered by works of engaged art, most of which is based on participation, joint work that tries to avoid any kind of hierarchy (the same strategy is applied on curators' projects, following the principle "Let's do something together").

In short, the concept of the redistribution of the sensible (that Foster criticizes) and the politics of dismissing authority and promotion of equal participation (Rancière), according to Foster, worked in favor of the fetishization of the object in a way that it becomes interpreted as quasi-subject:

"Recent art history shows a marked tendency to do much the same thing: images are said to have "power" or agency, pictures to have "wants" or desires, and so on. This corresponds to a similar tendency in recent art and architecture to present work in terms of subject hood. ²⁰ Although many practitioners aim, in good Minimalist fashion, to promote phenomenological experience, often what they offer is the near-reverse: "experience" returned as "atmosphere" and/or "affect", in spaces that confuse the actual with the virtual and/or with sensations that are produced as effects yet seem intimate, indeed internal, nonetheless (...). In this way the phenomenological reflexivity of building seems to do the perceiving for us. This, too, is a version of fetishization, for it takes thoughts and feelings, processes them as images and effects, and delivers them back to us for our appreciative amazement. As such it calls for antifetishistic critique." ²¹

But, as I see it, a matter of a great relevance that should be mentioned here, besides the fetishization of the object, being interpreted as a fake subject (by what the concept of reification has been re-actualized), is the much bigger *phenomenon of fetishization of events, acts of participation, presence of the individual in society, in a way that all of these become interpreted as quasi-presence*. In other words, contemporary cultural practice (art), expanding the field of representation into the wide field of social activism, has become the perfect tool for the transfer of the mechanism of deception that traditionally belonged only to the art (fetishization of objects – a quasi-subject) to the whole society (fetishization of events – a quasi-presence). Or, as Rancière, affirmatively, points out:

“We need to identify knowledge in action in uneducated and activity in viewers. Every viewer is an actor in his own story, every actor and every person of action is a simultaneous viewer of the same story.”²²

Specifically, substituting virtual for real is becoming a predominant practice in the production of the social today. In the field of culture, we witness the expansion of our presence in public, the expansion of jointment and action, in forms of different quasi-subjectivizations, conquering the public field and providing visibility for everyone (participation in art²³, workshop projects of NGOs, media phenomena like *Big Brother and Facebook*, a wide range of activism struggling for availability of information on the Internet as the struggle for *piracy* and open source systems, etc). In other words, it looks like if the presence of an individual in communal and public space has become a matter of course. The public space is being permanently redefined, conquered and ever more available. However, what is actually happening is the *privatization of public material space, rapid decrease of citizens' involvement in activities of general matter*, and the growth of urban and industrial zones (districts that are most commonly rich with resources) and large portions of land, that due to privatization become absolutely unavailable to citizens.

So, we can say that the neo-liberal ideological concept undoubtedly makes a foundation for most of these, so called “emancipatory” practices of today in a way that they increasingly move the presence of participants into the virtual realm. These theories and practices are actually a great way of covering up the fact that public space is becoming less and less ours. Perceived in this manner, these models of activism gain a new social function: they act as a way of subjectivization and de-traumatization of the potentiality of conflict, that would arise as a result of the increasing confiscation of the common and the public, seen in the broadest economic and political sense of the term.

What is set as a major task of a new avant-garde practice today

is primarily to figure out the exit from this formalist representational deadlock. It is urgent to find a different way to achieve the idea of horizontal participation. In order to keep the prefix “emancipatory”, the emergence of citizens in society and in the political struggle in general will need to contain a completely redefined relationship toward representation, as well as a Benjaminian²⁴ awareness of it. The avant-garde practice should not necessarily depart from representation as such, as the field of social action is, at least in the Western cultural heritage, so closely attached to it that the field of political struggle is almost unthinkable without it. However, what avant-garde practice will have to achieve is to get out of its formalist framework and secure a “solid” and “real” content of itself, by being subversive in relation to itself and connected to the *material conditions of production*.

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Illustration: A meeting during the neighbourhood project Local Politics and Urban Self-Government (detelinara.org), organized by Center for New Media kuda.org and Center for conceptual politics. Photo: Danilo Prnjat

Notes:

1. Rancière, Jacques. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (originally published as *Le Maître ignorant: Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle*). Translation by Kristin Ross. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991. ↩
2. Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator* (originally published as *Le Spectateur émancipé*). Translated by Gregory Elliott, 5. London: Verso, 2011. ↩
3. Ibid., 6. ↩
4. Debord, Guy. *Društvo spektakla* (originally published as *La Société du spectacle*). Translation by Aleksa Golijanin. Belgrade: Anarhija/Blok 45, 2001. ↩
5. Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator* (originally published as *Le Spectateur émancipé*). Translation by Gregory Elliott, 5. London: Verso, 2011. ↩
6. Jakić Ljubomir, “Platon Invented Communism.” Interview with Jacques Rancière, daily newspaper Politika. <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Kulturni-dodatak/Platon-je-izmislio-komunizam.lt.html>, 11/10/2012, 11am (my translation). ↩
7. Platon. *The Republic*. From <http://www.idph.com.br/conteudos/ebooks/republic.pdf>, 10/12/2010, 2pm ↩
8. Jakić, Ljubomir, “Platon Invented Communism”, Interview with Jacques Rancière, daily newspaper Politika. <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Kulturni-dodatak/Platon-je-izmislio-komunizam.lt.html>, 11/10/2012, 11am (my translation). ↩
9. The same question can be asked in terms of participatory art where the artist acts as an avant-garde activist who fights for the political interests of the oppressed. ↩
10. Foster, Hal. “Postcritical”. *October*, Ltd. And Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Winter 2012, 3–8. ↩

11. Kant, Immanuel. *Kritika moći suđenja* (originally published as *Kritik der Urteilskraft*). Translated by Nikola Popović. Belgrade: BIGZ, 1975. ↩
12. Almost the entire postmodernist philosophical tradition can be comprehended by this key. ↩
13. Benjamin, Walter. "The Author as Producer" (originally published as "Versuche über Brecht"). Translated by Anna Bostock. *New Left Review*, 1/62, July-August, 1970, 1–9. ↩
14. Althusser, Louis / Balibar, Etienne. *Kako čitati Kapital* (originally published as *Lire le capital*). Translated by Rade Kalaj. Zagreb: Izvori i Tokovi, 1975. ↩
15. The best example for this is the multicultural advertisement for Benetton with the slogan: United Colors of Benetton. ↩
16. Jameson, Frederick. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 2001. ↩
17. Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (originally published as *La Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*). Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum IPG, 2008. ↩
18. Virno, Paolo. *Gramatika mnoštva: Prilozi analizi suvremenih formi života* (originally published as *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*). Translated by Jasna Jakšić. Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk, 2004. ↩
19. Michaud, Yves. *Umjetnost u plinovitom stanju* (originally published as *L'art à l'état gazeux: Essai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique*). Translated by Jagoda Milinković. Zagreb: Ljevak, 2004. ↩
20. Graw, Isabelle, ed. *Art and Subjecthood: The return of the Human Figure in Semiocapitalism*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011 (Hal Foster's footnote). ↩
21. What was condemned in Minimalism as a concern with objecthood was really a concern with objectivity – the objectivity of structure, space, bodies in space, and so on. This concern drove the primary line of work out in Minimalism, but now a secondary line has become dominant. On this reversal, see "Painting Unbound," in my *The Architecture Complex*, London: Verso, 2011 (Hal Foster's footnote). ↩
22. Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator* (originally published as *Le Spectateur émancipé*). Translated by Gregory Elliott, 6. London: Verso, 2011. ↩
23. See: Bishop, Claire, ed. *Participation – Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: Whitechapel, 2006. ↩
24. Benjamin, Walter. "Umetničko delo u veku svoje tehničke reprodukcije" (originally published as *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*). In *Eseji*, translated by Milan Tabaković, 114–151. Belgrade: Nolit, 1974. ↩