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SUDEEP DASGUPTA

ART IS GOING ELSEWHERE. AND POLITICS HAS TO CATCH IT. AN INTERVIEW WITH JACQUES RANCIÈRE

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The reflections of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière shift in between literature, film, pedagogy, historiography, proletarian history and philosophy. He came to prominence when he contributed to Althusser's *Lire le capital* (1965) and, shortly after, published a fervent critique of Althusser – *La Leçon d'Althusser* (1974). He is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at University of Paris VIII (St. Denis) and continues to teach, as a visiting professor, in a number of universities, including Rutgers, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, and Berkeley. A recurrent motif in Rancière's work is capturing the relation between politics and aesthetics, and their various meanings in different contexts. Much of his work can be characterized as an attempt to rethink and subvert categories, disciplines and discourses. On October 30 2007, a Dutch combined translation of *Le partage du sensible* and *L'inconscient esthétique* was presented in Amsterdam.[1] On this occasion Sudeep Dasgupta interviewed Rancière on sensory experience, the play of art, and politics as a form of disturbance.

The first moment in your intellectual career was your engagement with Louis Althusser and marxism, in particular with the notion of philosophy as having a strong function in defining or in distinguishing science from ideology; philosophy was closely linked to a strict definition of science, producing concepts. You made a big impression with your important essay on critique in Marx. After that, you turned away from a particular way of thinking about philosophy and went to the archives, particularly to research on nineteenth century workers in France. What motivated that turn away from philosophy to the archives, which is not a very common turn that philosophers take? What did you hope to find there? Could you connect it to how your work developed subsequently?

I am not the first philosopher who decided to go to the archives. There was, of course, the example of Foucault. He did something very surprising for my generation; it was the first time a history of madness appeared. What was it? A book of a philosopher and it's all about questions of the poor, of medicine, of asylums. There already was this model and it was not a bad model, I think. Second, it was the leftist movement of '68; it became obvious that something was wrong with the idea that people were exploited and dominated because they didn't know the law of exploitation and domination; so the sciences were there to bring them the knowledge of what they wished to know. There was a sort of vicious circle: the people cannot understand the place where they are in the system because it is precisely a law of the system that it conceals itself. It was a kind of tautology. Science was supposed to free people and to give them the knowledge in order to emancipate them, but what science basically would explain is what people necessarily are to ignore, that is, what science could tell of their position. People were dominated because they were ignorant and they were ignorant because they were dominated.

So what I tried to do was get another idea of that vicious circle. First, of course, I had a kind of naive idea: let's go to the archives to see the reality of social movements, of workers' movements; let's find a sociology of workers' practice, workers' movement, workers' thinking and workers' emancipation.

But what appeared to me in this research is that it was impossible to oppose something like an 'authentic' workers' thought to Marxist thought. It was impossible to deduce the workers' movement, socialism and revolution from a lived experience from popular culture and so on. Why pre-

cisely? Because of the vicious circle. Just a little earlier Ruth Sonderegger explained in which way Plato said everything about the workers' condition.[2] According to Plato, workers have to do just their own business. They cannot do anything else but their own business for two reasons. The first reason is that they have no time. The second is that they have the *aptitude* fitting that business, which is the same thing as saying that they have no other aptitude. They have the aptitude to do *this*, and to be in *this* place, and to be in *this* space-time – which of course is the reverse of their exclusion. What interested me, and what I've discovered, is that the possibility of workers' emancipation is to transform the circle in a kind of spiral by getting out of that workers' identity which was not just a condition but a whole sensible world, that is, of domination and exploitation. It was a matter of what could be seen, what could be sensed. What does it mean, the distribution of the sensible? What kind of world is *given* to you, and how do you make sense of that given sensory world? What I've tried is to build from their collectivity a new kind of subjectivity. This means that proletarians had a possibility of getting away from that workers' identity, that workers' culture, that workers' body. Emancipation would be about creating for themselves a new body, a new lived world. And so it was clear that the problem was not that they ignored their condition but that for them it was *being able to ignore it*. To do as if they were not in that position.

There is this famous text of Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, saying that aesthetic judgment asks us only to be sensible of form. When standing in front of a palace, it does not matter that it was built out of the sweat of the poor people; we have to ignore that, says Kant. I think Kant was right. At the same time I came upon a text written by a joiner, a floor-layer,[3] and he explains precisely what he sees as he is laying a floor in a rich house. He decides to acquire an aesthetic perception of the room, of the garden, of the whole perspective. So he decides to do *as if* he had a disinterested gaze, and could get an aesthetic judgment, notwithstanding the fact that he is poorly paid, that he works for a boss, and that he works for the rich.

For me this was important. It reminded me of my view of aesthetics – aesthetics not being a sociology of art but as being a form of experience. That is, an experience of disconnection. This has been conceptionalized by Kant and Schiller in terms of disconnection: there is something that escapes the normal conditions of sensory experience. That is what was at stake in emancipation: getting out of the ordinary ways of sensory experience. This thought has been important for my idea of politics, not being about the relations of power but being about the framing of the sensory world itself.

Where do you locate your work? This has been a problem for a lot of people over the years: What is Rancière? Is he a philosopher? Is he a literary critic? Your books cover fields from pedagogy, the writing of history, philosophy, cinema and literature. You've occupied a position in philosophy and in aesthetics. Yet you have very strongly stated that you are neither a philosopher of politics nor are you a historian of art. Would you say that your work, through the decades, has leaned or been closer to a particular discipline, or could you say the point of your work has been precisely to critique them and if so, how? What kind of central themes come up?

You are interested in an object and you try to understand it. For instance, you try to understand how people can change the sensible frames of existence – as was the case in the process of emancipation. So you go to the archives, to see documents about workers' conditions, workers' thought, et cetera. At that point you are supposed to be in the field of the historian. Historians ask you: what is your historical method? You have to apply a historical method. My question became: what is historical method? You only try to understand something; therefore you go to materials that may help you to understand. Then you try to make sense of them. What kind of method is this? You use your brains. You try to find something and you use your brains to make sense of it. Historical method does mean something; I am not saying it does not mean anything. It means you have to be located in *this* place, because *this* object is social history. Workers' thought

was part of workers' life, workers' experience, the expression of that experience. There was a leading social historian of the working class in France who made a bibliography about literature on workers. And it happened that my book was put in the subcategory 'cultural and religious conscience of work'. The right method of the philosophers, sociologists, the literary critics, is just the same as the Platonic commandment: you have to do your own business. But, of course, if I do my own business, it means I have to give up my object. My object is people who don't want to keep to their own business.

From my point of view, there is no real field of discipline. The borders of a discipline just mean: you are not supposed to go outside of this. To understand the question I just had to go outside. I had to put together things that do not go together. Namely, Plato's text about workers' lack of time, and a worker's text in the nineteenth century – thousands of years after Plato – dealing precisely with what it meant to have no time. So if I want to understand, I have to cross the borders of disciplines. This kind of delineation of borders is the other face of an inner prescription.

There are two ways of thinking. There is the thinking of the poor, which is the expression of his condition. And there is the thinking of a thinker, who makes the bibliography and who organizes the category. And this thinker knows he can encompass the totality and understand that in this totality are some manifestations of thought. But thought is just an expression of a condition. So basically when my work doesn't belong to a discipline, it belongs to an attempt to break the borders of the disciplines. Because borders are only there to say you must not cross the border, and to say: there are two kinds of thought, two kinds of thinking beings. What I've tried to demonstrate is there is only one kind of thinking being and that everybody uses his or her own brains to try to understand something.

So a discipline is a fiction. This does not mean it is imaginary. It means it is a kind of construction of a territory with a population, with forms of sensory representation, with ways of making sense of things. It is also a political, or a meta-political, fiction. If you think of sociology, for instance, and the way Bourdieu 'discovered' the *habitus* and so on, it reminds us of the fact that sociology is not a kind of science that has fallen from the sky at a certain time. Sociology was politics. It emerged in the nineteenth century, that is, after the revolution, because there was the big concern at the time that people are no longer at their place, that there are no more common representations uniting people, no monarchy, no religion, no feudality. Thus we had to invent a new form of aggregation of society and new forms of collective thinking. And in this case, of course, new forms of anomie and of heresy, a form of modern thinking about emancipation, about being different from oneself, had to be pushed aside.

Part of the growing importance of your work and its reception in the art world, has been your very strong critique of a certain kind of teleology, a certain kind of historical narrative, which goes, very quickly put: realism, modernism, postmodernism. You have also been very critical of contemporary art which claims to be political, to the extent that it is very critical of capitalism, for example, and the fact that we are all caught up in the consumer culture, and you have argued that what art keeps doing in this kind of denunciation of capitalism is to bear witness to its own powerlessness. You reject this narrative of realism/modernism/postmodernism, and you've brought up three regimes: the ethical, the representative, and the aesthetic regime. The aesthetic regime has been crucial to a lot of your arguments in different fields. If there are problems with the realism/modernism/postmodernism-narrative, could we see the ethical, representative and aesthetic regimes as a kind of parallel historical narrative? To put briefly, is it one narrative rejected by you and replaced by another, or is there something specific about these three regimes that make us rethink how to think about our relation to history? I am thinking in particular of the category of the 'aesthetic regime'.

My first problem with the narrative of realism/modernism/postmodernism is that it doesn't help us to understand what happened in art and in aesthetic experience during the last two centuries. Take for instance the case of realism – and in Bram Ieven's talk about literature[4] – what is the signification of the realistic novel in the nine-

teenth century? It is not at all a kind of peak of representation because it would represent everything in all kinds of ways. It was a break with a regime in which only some things could be and had to be represented in a certain way. So what realism means is not a kind of fanatical imitation of reality. What the realistic novel means, on the contrary, is the disruption of the dominant way in which reality was represented. If we think that for realism that every subject is good, this means ultimately that there are no subjects – very well sensed by Flaubert – that all subjects are equivalent and that ultimately there are no subjects at all. This counts for the realistic novelists, as well as for abstract art. There is no subject matter at all. So this opposition between realism, modernism and postmodernism is all a fake imagination. We really have to get rid of it. Take, for instance, the idea of modernism as the autonomy of the arts. Historically modernism was about the contrary: it was the idea that art had to be committed to modern life, the idea that art had to create forms of life – no more paintings and symphonies and so on.

It's not that I want to replace concepts with better concepts. What is bad about those categories for me is that they rely on an idea of historical necessity. In the case of the three regimes I try to define three forms of function. But this does not mean: three historical ages. The aesthetic regime is the regime in which all forms can coexist. At the same time, the aesthetic regime is defined by a specific form of aesthetic experience. But basically, this regime is of coexistence. Let us look at the notion of the classics. This notion is a modern invention; an invention of the aesthetic regime. Before, we had the distinction between the ancients and the moderns. The very idea of 'the classics' is to re-qualify and to re-inscribe ancient literature in the present. In the seventeenth or eighteenth century nobody ever played Sophocles, or Aeschylus. They were praised, but not played. And now they are played.

The point is that the aesthetic regime allows old forms to coexist with new forms. It is fascinating if you think of cinema. What cinema did in the 1920's and 1930's, and specifically in Hollywood, was to reinvent definitions of genres, and old separations disappeared. For instance, look at the directions of the great Hollywood producers: the idea that a plot must be like *this.* The idea of action and plot was the same as the idea in the eighteenth century about theatre. This also means that the aesthetic regime is a regime of ambivalence. Aesthetic experience is experience of the ambivalent. The aesthetic experience is set up as a kind of disruption. In Kant and Schiller, for instance, there is a kind of experience that is distinguished from the ordinary connections of experience. At the same time, we know, as it is disconnected from the hierarchical organization of the sensible, it became the basis of a new idea of revolution and a new idea of community where people are equal as sensible creatures and not only as citizens. So the aesthetic regime gave a new form to ethical thinking. It is clear that revolutionary art is a kind of wavering between the idea of aesthetic experience and of art that is supposed to create new forms of life and to suppress itself. So what I tried to do is to substitute teleological concepts and historical necessity, by categories that help us to understand the entanglement of different logics.

Let's turn to the question of political or politicized art. Are there any criteria or valid foundations on the basis of which we can judge whether an artwork is political or not? Or what the politics is of a particular artwork? Your response has been: there are no criteria, only choices. But in your readings in cinema (in Eisenstein's The General Line *for example) you talk about the narrative that desires to produce a certain meaning but which always gets interrupted or in some way thwarted by an element in the artwork which is non-signifying, which cannot as quickly be ascribed to a meaning. So there is this kind of play between meaning and materiality in an artwork. Connecting that argument of yours, which you have shown in literature but also in cinema, could you say if that would be, if not a foundation, a way to judge whether the artwork is political or not? Would that be going some way towards it by highlighting this aspect of meaning and its interruption? Does that relate to politics and aesthetics?*

First of all, we cannot enclose the question in the concept of politics of art. What is efficient is not art in and of itself; art is part of a certain distribu-

tion of the sensible – part of a certain reconfiguration of experience. What was important, in the case of workers' emancipation, was the possibility of leisure and the ability to see paintings, much more than specific words or paintings. People were not emancipated by revolutionary painting. But they could acquire a new kind of body, a new gaze out of this availability of any kind of painting. There is something wrong with the idea that political effects are to be located in the artwork itself or, in particular, in the intention of the artist. What happens in the aesthetic regime of art is that artists create objects that escape their will. Sometimes it denies their will. There are democratic works that are made precisely by artists who were not at all democrats.

Secondly, there is a political potential where there is a disruption of a given organization of the relation between the sensible presentation and forms of meanings. We know that this idea was implemented by political artists – like Eistenstein. Eisenstein was playing a double play: on the one side, Eisenstein was playing on the rigours of editing and cutting, the organization of the shots as a production of a meaning. And at the same time, he plays on something quite different. There is a kind of lyricism in the sequences of *The General Line* that is obviously borrowed from the tradition of Russian painting. Let us look over and over again at the political artist, who plays on the disturbing element; I am thinking of estrangement in Brecht, of course. I would say estrangement is also a kind of double play, because there is this kind of straight line, you actually *choose* something that is strange; but as you choose it, it is *disturbing* in the very scenery of the sensible.

This disturbing element must lead to the awareness that there is something wrong with the social order. But obviously there is no reason to believe that civil disturbance, as an effect, will lead to an awareness of the political situation of the world and to mobilization. On the one hand, Brecht's view of estrangement relies on the Marxist theory of alienation; on the other hand it relies on the surrealist and Dadaist practice of disturbing elements. But in this case the disturbing element leads to no specific form of awareness or mobilization. This politics of the uncanny elements is always ambivalent because of the meaning *and* the withdrawal of meaning. When you look at this play, you can define a politics of aesthetics – using some forms of disturbance or the uncanny. But what's important: you cannot define the effects of it. The politics of literature, or the politics of art, is not oriented at the constitution of political subjects. It is much more oriented at the reframing of the field of subjectivity as an impersonal field. In a certain way, the political interpretation of the uncanny in terms of effects is always a kind of negotiation. Art is going elsewhere. And politics has to catch it. The problem is not what artists have to do to become political; the question has to be reversed: what do political subjects have to do with art?

You've talked about the constitution of the subjects as an impersonal field. In your books you have made very clear that one cannot ascribe a certain set of qualities to a certain group of people, which is exactly the 'police regime'. There is no prescribed subject of the revolution as in the old days we used to talk about the working class, et cetera. In a sense, then, your theory about the subject, who would be related to the practice of dissensus, is always in formation and hybrid. The hybridity of the subject becomes very clear in The Nights of Labor.[5] *These workers are workers, but the problem is they are something else. So you have developed a theory of the subject as hybrid, as changing, and in a way as errant – wandering in a place they shouldn't be wandering. How would you relate this theory of the subject to the rise of identity politics, theories of our identity both within and outside the academy? One field is postcolonial studies, where there has been an ongoing critique of the unified subject with a fixed essence. How would the development of your theory of the subject throughout your work relate to some of these ways of thinking?*

As you probably know, I am French [laughter]. In France there is no identity politics, there are no postcolonial studies. This means I never had to address those kinds of issues that are crucial in other countries. They are

systematically ignored in France. So my dealing with the question of the subject never was an attempt to address issues of identity politics or hybrid, postcolonial identities and so on. Basically I have no interest in creating a theory of the subject. When I was young, in the time of Althusserianism, there were these strong statements about the subject who is ensnared or entrapped in the symbolic order and we would know what happens when the subject wants to get out of the trap. My interest was to define subjects in terms of capacity and not in terms of incapacity. Also I did not want to define natures of subjects, but processes of subjectivization. This was thirty years ago; I wanted to get out of a certain description of social identities like, for instance, the idea of popular culture, workers' thinking, and so on. What I've tried to define is the way in which every form of subjectivization is a form of dis-identification. Certainly there you can see some relations between my dealing with identity and subjectivity, and the problems in postcolonial studies. I've only taken a different perspective.

But I don't like so much this notion of hybridity, because it seems to refer much more to the constitution of a subject rather than to processes of subjectivization.

You have been extremely critical in many of your books about the turn towards a kind of politics which gets reduced to the state, and in particular, about the ways in which experts, philosophers, sociologists, other intellectuals and administrators withdraw into something like a state apparatus which then claims to function as a democracy. Here in the Netherlands, we have a certain history of the partage du sensible *as well, which is the 'zuilensysteem' or so-called pillar system. All kinds of groups had gotten their own institutional spaces and society was neatly divided between all of these communities. Around the late 1990's that started falling apart when certain discussions came up around the immigrant – in particular the "not well-educated, preferably Muslim" immigrant. There was an attack on the way Dutch society was structured; an attack on the so-called elites in The Hague. There was almost a kind of attempt of repartition of what society would mean here. The pillar system is bad, elites are wrong; and there should be a politics in the name of the people. There is this vague, amorphous thing called 'people' without any fixed subject. Could this development in the Netherlands be seen as an example of dissensus? And does dissensus have any political leanings? Can you think of a* partage du sensible *which is right wing, or not emancipatory?*

I am not arguing for people or against the elites. I argue about two forms of structuration of the community. The logic of police versus the logic of politics does not mean the elites are the bad ones and the people are good. What I try to distinguish are not two categories of populations, but two logics of functioning. The logic of *police* is the logic of separate competence; that there is a specific competence for governing people. The logic of *politics* is the logic of equal competence of anybody. It rarely happens that the people agree with this idea because they think that there are parts of the population that obviously are not competent and should be put aside. We are in a situation where there is this kind of oligarchic attempt to erase the political stage. When this stage tends to disappear you can see new forms of strange organization, or restructuration, of the community and of the relation between the same and the other, and so on. This happened in France with Le Pen. What was the basis of the success of Le Pen? Precisely this void of the political stage: the possibility to present a kind of caricature or perversion of politics in the name of the people. But the question is: in the name of *what* people?

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[1] Rancière, J. (2007) *Het esthetische denken*. Amsterdam: Valiz.

[2] This interview was preceded by a lecture of Ruth Sonderegger (University of Amsterdam).

[3] Rancière, J. (1983) *Louis-Gabriel Gauny. Le philosophe plébéien*. (ed.) Paris / St. Denis, La Découverte / Presses universitaires de Vincennes.

[4] This interview was also preceded by a lecture of Bram Ieven (University of Leiden).

[5] Rancière, J. (1989) *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-century France*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.