
8. The destituent power of Rancière's radical equality

Camillo Boano

INTRODUCTION

Jacques Rancière (born 1940) – Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the Université de Paris, VIII – is one of the most influential philosophers of our time, whose figure and thoughts occupy a vast and rising body of literature (Davis, 2010, 2013; Rockhill and Watts, 2009; May, 2008; 2010; Bowman and Stamp, 2011; Deranty and Ross, 2012; Quintana, 2020). As one of the contemporary thinkers who has re-interrogated the tasks and challenges of critical theory, Rancière offers analytics for the many mechanisms of injustice, exclusion and domination in our late capitalist societies and, at the same time, conceptualizes an agenda for society's liberation (Bingham and Biesta, 2010; Biesta, 2010; Rancière, 2017b; Quintana, 2018).

Bringing to the fore the relationship between the political and the aesthetic (Rancière, 2002, 2006, 2013; Tanke, 2011; Gage, 2019), Rancière develops reflections on the equality of citizens in the face of power and knowledge, questioning the dominant position of the intellectual who speaks truth to the world.

Recentring politics as aesthetics, Rancière provides a critical theory that makes visible the many mechanisms that configure power and keep 'bodies trapped in the reiteration of their subjections, instead of delving into the affective territories that circulate among them and the unforeseeable ways in which they could be transformed' (Quintana, 2020: 2). Tracing the practices of emancipation in their singularity and their aesthetic-political (experiential, corporeal, affective) dimension (Quintana, 2020), Rancière positions politics as the disruption of accounts that premise politics on certain conditions or capacities (Huzar, 2020).

This chapter introduces Rancière's key motif of equality and how it helps us to rethink the notion of power. For Rancière it is the absent presence of 'equality' that both enables social order and allows its hierarchy of power relations to be challenged. Elaborating on equality, the chapter frames Rancière's politics and power in a way that is never static and pure, but characterized in terms of division, conflict and polemics that allow the invention of the new, the unauthorized and the disordered.

Particular attention will be given to the tension within the politics of aesthetics. Rancière called this *le partage du sensible* to describe the many procedures by which forms of experience – broadly understood as the domains of what can be thought, said, felt or perceived – are divided up and shared between legitimate and illegitimate bodies and forms of activity.

Acknowledging the relevance of Rancière's body of work in planning discourses (Dikeç, 2005, 2007; Raco, 2014; Metzger et al., 2015) framed as conflictive (Pløger, 2004; Grange and Gunder, 2019) or emancipatory and revolutionary (Purcel, 2009, 2014) or discussed within democracy and community formation (Sonderregger, 2002; Inston, 2019), this chapter is suggesting a complementary reflection ~~able to reframe~~ power as destituent, an an-archic power. Without tracing a comprehensive genealogy of the **term**, it appears for the first time by

the Colectivo Situaciones in Buenos Aires to describe the original features of the Argentine *piqueteros* movement of 2001 capable of bringing about a real change in Argentina by delegitimizing existing political forces (Laudani, 2016). More recently, the concept has been found in Giorgio Agamben, a figure who expresses the full force of its political meaning in *The Use of Bodies* (2016) where suggesting that a destituent power is one that 'deactivate[s] something and render[s] it inoperative – a power ... without simply destroying it but by liberating the potentials that have remained inactive in it in order to allow a different use of them' (Agamben, 2016: 273).

Contemporary planning and other post-positivistic disciplines are caught in the wake of multiple overlapping crises that question in essence their theories and modes of practice. These crises include global climate change, hegemonic neoliberalism, growing inequalities, the surge of a fascist and far-right extremism; all of which overlap with the structural complexities of racial capitalism, settler colonial global apartheid and the other diverse issues of globalisation (Porter, 2010; Cohen, 2012; Brown, 2019; Besteman, 2020; Harcourt, 2020).

Therefore, a reflection on a radical alternative to constituent power able to offer multiple and plural instances of liberation is both necessary and urgent.

In the wake of Trump's election in the United States, Roy (2017: np) had posited that 'we must think critically and historically about this specific infrastructure and its alliances with various forms of power ... complicit with colonialism and imperialism'. This urgent call to arms 'will require relinquishing the cherished myths of neutrality and innocence and instead deploying the power of knowledge and expertise for the purposes of civil disobedience ... being in opposition to state power rather than seeking its patronage' (Roy, 2017: np). Inspired by radical black scholars, Roy sees a sort of destituent power, that she calls a 'double agent' as 'one who is embedded in systems of power and yet is able to stage moments of rebellion against and within such systems' (Roy, 2017: np). Not a return to the foundations of the discipline – fully compromised in the current crisis-making – but a series of liberatory practices, without an *archè*, intended both as origin and command/intention (Metzger et al., 2015). It is not the rejection of the planning subject and its strategic intention, but rather an acknowledgement that such practices exclude and oppress. More recently, Roy (2021, np) posits again that the complex present 'demands that we divest from the protocols of neutrality that have kept planning on the sidelines of freedom struggles, making liberal excuses for its role in the reproduction of racial harm'. Bélanger (2020: 127), reframes these destituent words as an undoing:

to undress this carceral landscape requires the unmapping of settler urbanism. It means destroying the dispossessive categories that sanction exclusion, exploitation, extraction and erasure. Dismantling the structures that obviate the legal landscape of treaties and that are constructed to sever relations between lands, waters, beings, cycles and communities. Unplanning oppressive policies. Unnaming colonial place names. Debasing base maps. Debunking benchmarks. Redrawing legends. Retroceding lands.

Following Roy, there is the necessity to think of planning not as an ontology of disciplinary, geographical or methodological power, but one that is able to offer and bring out a 'power of not' (Agamben, 2016: 283) an undoing, a 'non-projecting imagination' as Glissant (1997) would say.

While the first part of the chapter outlines Rancière's key concepts, the second frames some reflections on power that dislocates politics in a territory without foundations and serves to establish an initial qualifying point of destituent power. Importantly, this chapter is not

intended to be a collection of references on Rancière-ways-of-planning, but neither is it an overview of his theories. More precisely, it poses itself as thoughts in movement, thoughts that look at praxis without directly descending from it. Earlier reflections were emerging in some of my engagement with the design actions of community architects and everyday citizens in South East Asia (Boano and Kelling, 2013; Boano and Hunter, 2018; Boano and Talocci, 2018) to which I briefly refer as illustration. Thinking on power and planning with Rancière helps to reflect on a destituent politics (Tari, 2017; Laudani, 2016; Boano, 2020). A politics with a limited but precise task: to create the conditions, so that another politics – the one that today seems impossible – can happen ‘to unleash a politics of the event, the event of politics nests in a singular desertion from what is, to break the normal course of history and produce a multiple, ecstatic, plurality’ (Di Cesare, 2020: 16).

RANCIÈRE IN CONTEXT

Rancière’s power cannot be understood, either theoretically or politically, without taking into account the context in which it emerged – the struggle in France in the second half of the twentieth century, the reception of German philosophy from the First World War to the Second, the Resistance to May 1968, and from the election of Mitterrand to the onset of neoliberalism to the more recent revolt of the *gilets jaunes* (Rancière, 2019). His thoughts emerge outside of a Habermasian deliberative theory that cannot accept the idea of an a-conflictual consensus, letting Cesarale (2019: 135) call Rancière’s politics ‘born from dissent’, and centred on ‘the class struggle that generates the conditions of politics’ (Cesarale, 2019: 135–136).

Rancière offers an account of politics in relation to a dominant order that is marked by its members’ possession of reasoned capacity of speech. He also highlights the problematic aspects in which such dominant frames ‘prevent us from considering the unforeseeable and incalculable ways in which bodies can reinvent themselves from the positions, roles, and practices they are subjected to’ (Quintana, 2020: 2). In such situations he analyses the ‘interruptive force of forms of existence that were previously insensitive and that, via their demonstration of their reasoned speech, transform’ (Huzar, 2020: 1): he calls this ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière, 2010: 36), making themselves understood as speaking beings when they previously could not be heard in this way. The conceptual distancing from the structural Marxism of Althusser (Rockhill and Watts, 2009; May, 2008) and the refusal of the ideology of the scientific status of theory and its dominant linguistic paradigm, brings Rancière into direct engagement with the material, the concrete and the sensory dimension of experience (Rancière, 1994; Rockhill and Watts, 2009).

POLICE AND POLITICS: UNFOLDING OF DISSENSUS AND THE EMERGENCE OF EQUALITY

Recalling the Aristotelian *polis*, Rancière used the word *police* to refer to the established social order of governing where the political problem is drastically reduced to assigning individuals their place and position through the administration of the conflicts between different parties by a government funded on juridical and technical competences. In contrast, Rancière’s *politics* is constituted by *dissensus*, by disruptions of the police order through the dispute over the

common space of the *polis* and the common use of language (Rancière, 1999; 2010). With such an approach, politics is not about identifying the *excluded* and trying to include them as such logic of identification belongs to the police. Politics *proper* is to question the *given* order of police that seems to be the *natural* order of things and to verify the equality of any speaking being to any other speaking being (Rancière, 1999). Police, therefore, is an order of bodies that are organized with specific allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, ways of saying. Police, not politics, assign bodies by name to a particular place and task in the order of things. For Mecchia (2009: 71) his essential aspect of politics is 'the affirmation of the equality in the speech of people who are supposed to be equal but who are not counted as such by the established policing of the democratic community'. This is the true political principle of 'agonistic claim to equality, as defined in humans, primarily by the sharing of speech as logos: that is not the mere voice, but reason' (Mecchia, 2009: 74). The centrality of equality is to be found in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), where Rancière criticises any distributional approach to ethics and governance. Alternatively, in the words of May 'where there is a distribution, there is a distributor ... the claim of equality, then, is a claim directed at governing institutions on behalf of the individual those institutions govern ... equality is a debt owed to the individuals by the governing institution of a society or a community' (May, 2009: 109).

Illustrating the story of Joseph Jacotot (a French pedagogue forced to move to Flanders in the early nineteenth century, without speaking Flemish, but nevertheless able to get a position as a teacher, practicing with the aid of only one dual-language edition of *Telemachus* in French and Flemish), Rancière draws a very important and scandalous conclusion: 'what stultifies the common people is not the lack of instruction, but the belief in the inferiority of their intelligence' (Rancière, 1991: 39). This reflection brings out a crucial element in Rancière's concept of equality: the presupposition of equality that should be the basis for any democratic politics; the presupposition that people are, in some sense, equally intelligent. To presuppose that people are equally intelligent is not to presuppose that they are capable of the same. Rather, it is to presuppose that each person, anyone and everyone as Rancière puts it, is capable of speaking to one another, understanding one another, and reasoning with one another. The equality of intelligence, then, is not a numerical or quantitative equality. Nor is it a conclusion to an argument, but rather a starting point for politics. He clarifies that 'our problem isn't proving that all intelligence is equal. It's seeing what can be done under that presupposition. And for this, it's enough for us that the opinion be possible – that is, that no opposing truth be proved' (Rancière, 1991: 46).

In *Disagreement* (1999) Rancière expands this point beside the pedagogical implication orienting his thought to a radically egalitarian understanding of politics as the enactment of such equality, writing that 'what makes an action political is ... the form in which confirmation of equality is inscribed in the setting up of a dispute' (Rancière, 1999: 32). Equality becomes therefore a condition of the possibility of Rancière's conception of agonistic politics, never pacified, restricted and simply organized in space and time.

By equality, Rancière does not mean a ~~principle~~ that can be stated independently of a particular social dispute, confrontation, agonistic discourse, or assemblage of power. Instead this implies 'the pure empty quality of equality between anyone and everyone' (Rancière, 1999: 35). When seen in this light 'emancipation is neither a movement toward illumination, in which we manage to see what did not let itself be seen, nor a process of knowledge and acknowledgment of what we did not know, nor the reappropriation of a capacity that had become separated from itself' (Quintana, 2020: 3). In challenging the emancipatory potential

of critical theory (Rockhill and Watts, 2009; Cesarale, 2019), Quintana (2020: 4) suggests that such arrangements are ‘always affective, corporeal forms of awareness’ and therefore an ‘emancipatory movement is, above all, an affective movement that pushes one to “seek another way of life” different from the habitual one, on the basis of the affirmation of the power of bodies to reconfigure themselves, of their plasticity’.

~~Stemming from~~ this, we can say that for Rancière there is politics only when there are no foundations. For him, politics consists of the process that takes away any foundation – *archè* Di Cesare (2020b) would have said – from any social order. Since an order always tends to stabilize itself and represent itself as complete, rational and absolute, politics shows its conditional and fragile character. In fact, it takes place in the interruption of an order, its presumed naturalness; as itself intermittent, politics is not always there, indeed it never exists, it does not exist, but is carried out here and there as the disruption of an effective order. Such a perspective, in such an intractable form, poses more ‘political’ questions than it answers. Patton argues that ‘politics is commonly thought in terms of struggles over power institutions, public reasons and public opinions. By contrast for Rancière (2012: 129), ‘politics is a matter of conflicts over the very existence of this stage as well as the make-up status of the performers who are entitled or able to appear’. Without a terrain, a specific area, a surface and an object whether in the form of the state, the government, the territory or the law, politics is also deprived of a subject whether in the form of people, nation or class who can guide an emancipatory process.

In this interpretation of politics, equality gives rise to politics in a unique way as it becomes a continuous polemical expression of it, never fixed and assumed even if presupposed in any social order. As May (2008: 40) puts it, ‘voting, writing to elected representatives, even attending a demonstration, are not by themselves matters of politics. Politics concerns something else: it concerns equality’. The rare event of politics happens only when ‘the traditional mechanisms of what are usually called “politic” are put into question’ (May, 2008: 40) and equality emerges.

POLITICS AND RECONFIGURATION OF BODIES: THE *PARTAGE*

Jaques Rancière’s *caesura* with the linguistic structural Marxism towards a material, sensorial and concrete formulation of politics and its possible emancipation are the centre of a new politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics (Rancière, 2002, 2006, 2013; Highmore, 2011; Davies, 2013b). Rancière’s *le partage du sensible* describes the ~~many~~ procedures by which forms of experience – broadly understood as the domains of what can be thought, said, felt or perceived – are divided up and shared between legitimate and illegitimate persons and forms of activity. The double meaning of the French term *partage* as both ‘to share, to have in common’, and also ‘to divide, to share out’ (Mechoulan, 2004: 3) which refers to the fact that, ‘the affirmation of something in common is at the same time the repartition of authorized positions’ (Mechoulan, 2004: 3). For Rancière, proper order is always interrupted by impropriety which, despite being focused on critical writing and ‘literality’ served to set the stage for his provocative conception of politics and his constant and insistent defence of democracy as *dissensus*, as scandalous (Rancière, 2010, 2017).

Therefore, Rancière (2010: 35) views politics as a refusal to properly determine what constitutes politics: ‘the essential object of political disputes is the very existence of politics itself’. For Rancière (1999: 30), ‘political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place

assigned to it or changes a place's destination'. Politics disrupts 'ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying' (Rancière, 1999: 29) that are allocated 'within a dominant, extant order' (Rancière, 1999: 29). This is a position that has been criticized by Huzar (2020: 14), because 'an insistence on politics demonstrating equality ignores the fugitive politics proper of the black tradition and the politics of those subject', thereby endangering 'what constitutes politics by linking politics with making oneself visible in the transformation of the aesthesis of a dominant order' (Huzar, 2020: 3).

Huzar's critique is an important reflection on the power of invisibility and fugitivity we do not have space to explore in detail, however, it does not modify the central idea of politics as reconfiguration of places. Rancière's (1999: 30) central spatial reference remains a reconfiguration of a space 'where parties, parts or lack of parts have been defined ... making visible what had no business being seen and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise'. This reconfiguration of a space remains heavily illustrative for a newly conceptualized version of power that is not static, transformative and always contested and that in some extreme, includes a fugitive strategy. One of the ways in which police avoid the disturbance of politics is to name phenomena and assign them to their 'proper places' in the established order, thereby de-politicising them (Dikeç, 2002, 2005). In Rancière's approach, this is not a question of politics; it is about alterations in a police order. Politics, therefore, is not about identifying the 'excluded' and trying to include them. The logic of identification belongs to the police. Politics is not, furthermore, about the negotiation of interests by previously identified groups. Politics proper is to question the 'given' order of police that seems to be the 'natural' order of things, to question the whole and its partitioned spaces, and to verify the equality of any speaking being to any other speaking being (Rancière, 1999). Therefore, genuine political activities always involve forms of innovation that tear bodies from their assigned places and prevent free speech and right of expression from being reduced to mere functionality (Rancière and Corcoran, 2010). With Quintana (2020: 4) this produces 'a rupture with a corporeality, with a way of experiencing the body, which brings about a transformation of its position, that is, an inscription in another sensible universe, other than the one assigned to it'. Thinking with what she coined a 'politics of bodies', emancipatory potentials and new realities are emerging, manifesting 'in other economies of affective forces, in other forms of gestuality and in practices of corporeal reflectivity that also produce another way of seeing the world, of being affected by it, and of judging it' (Quintana, 2020: 4). For Quintana (2020: 4) this is really the manifestation of what Rancière's *partage du sensible* as 'alteration of the way in which bodies take on what they can, in the way they experience their capacities and incapacities'. This happens when *dissensus* emerges. Dissensus introduces new subjects and heterogeneous objects into the fields of perception. Such emergent distribution sets the divisions between what is visible and invisible, speakable and unspeakable, in Rancière's words – audible and inaudible. It determines what can be thought, made or done (Porter, 2007), that 'define[s] the 'modes of perception' that make that order visible and sayable in the first place' (Rancière, 2010: 20).

AESTHETICS AS POLITICS

Since the early 1990s, Rancière's work has increasingly focused on aesthetics. He has written a series of works on film and literature in which he stresses the political dimension of aesthet-

ics, and a number of works of political theory in which he argues that an aesthetic dimension is inherent in politics (Conley, 2005; Rancière, 2017). In an interview with Mark Foster Gage (2019: 10), Rancière posited that

aesthetics is not the theory of art, appreciation of art, or so on ... It is not art, but it is what constitutes the sensible experience. It is about the experience of a common world. The aesthetic problem is not at all about beauty. It is about the experience of a common world and who is able to share this experience.

As elaborated earlier, the *sensible* is an aesthetic order in a broad sense centred on a particular kind of speech situation which is often litigious and conflictive, inventing new ways of being, seeing and saying, that emphasize both an order of intelligibility and a share-out or order of distribution. An order of intelligibility makes sense but is intimately related also to an order of distribution. An order of distribution derives from an order of sense and, in addition, constitutes social division.

Any *partage* is open to polemical egalitarian challenge, establishing a setting for the creation of new subjectivities, and new forms of collective enunciations (Rancière and Corcoran, 2010: 7). Such partition serves to draw together Rancière's political-philosophical apparatus and acts as lynchpin to his interests in aesthetics when he states that 'aesthetic is at the core of politics' (Rancière, 2006: 13). He defines aesthetic as 'a delimitation of spaces and time, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise' (Rancière, 2006: 13) where partitions 'define[s] the 'modes of perception' that make that order visible and sayable in the first place' (Rancière, 2001: 20). Politics in this formal sense necessarily takes the form of aspect-change. Following the recent exchange between Rancière and Honneth (2016), we can put this point another way: a police order is an order of recognition; politics is a struggle over recognition.

Rancière's work is illuminating as it clarifies the call to see the political as aesthetics and politics in aesthetic terms. More importantly, this approach is not anti-materialist. In contrast, it is essential to see that aesthetic transformation involves not only a change of consciousness but also material social changes. For Rancière, the idea of the distribution of the sensible is best explained by Gage (2019: 17), in that this idea implies that

an art always does something else than its proper business. At this point, it may meet the paths of emancipation, since emancipation means that you stop doing just your 'own business'. The aesthetic is not the same as the artistic. The artistic is about the implementation of an idea. It implies some kind of anticipation of the result, which may be put to the extreme in the case of political art. Instead, the aesthetic means that you don't exactly know what will be the effect of what you are doing.

Central here is the process of becoming a political subject, in which those who have no recognized part in the social order, who are invisible or inaudible in political terms, assert their egalitarian claim – a collective claim to exist as political subjectivity. Such a process has three different dimensions. First, it is an argumentative demonstration, second, a heterologic disidentification, and third, a theatrical and spectacular dramatization. Space is crucial to this, as it becomes the creative and dramatic stage for visibility. In the words of Holloway (2005), this process is 'theatocratic' as it is creative and constructive and involves not only the manifestation of a new subject but also the construction of common space or 'scenes' of relationality which did not exist previously. This dimension of theatrical dramatization thus goes beyond the single perception of visibility/audibility – the stage – in that it constructs new

ways in which parts of society relate to each other and reconfigures the way in which subjects are heard and seen. '[S]pace ... becomes an integral element of the interruption of the 'natural' (or, better yet, naturalized) order of domination through the constitution of a place of encounter by those that have no part in that order' (Dikeç, 2002: 172). Aesthetics – rethought as 'the invention of new forms of life' – becomes a critical break with common sense and opens up possibilities of new commonalities of sense. Here, politics changes the fundamentals on which judgements about what makes sense are based and thus destabilizes the 'aesthetic regime' that renders occurrences sensible or not. This is important for planning and design as it 'is not only supposed to construct units for inhabiting, but really constructing new senses of seeing, working, acting, and feeling' (Gage, 2019: 18). Yet what Rancière offers ultimately is a power of moments, rather than a politics of movements. As other critics have noted, there is little sense in his writing of how one gets from one moment of political disagreement to another, and little interest in social change – in how a better order might be established. However, the strength and originality of Rancière's philosophy of the political remain.

POLITICS THAT IS NOT POWER: TOWARDS A DESTITUENT POLITICS

Rancière's body of work has been a reference for several disciplines, including architecture and planning. His work was used to unpack the planning/resistance interface (Dikeç, 2005, 2007; Raco, 2014; Nicholls and Uitermark, 2017), the urban post-political (Davidson and Iveson, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2008; 2009, 2011), the conflictive dimension of planning (Pløger, 2004), the complex praxis of social movements and urban democracy (Purcel, 2009, 2014; Bassett, 2014; Meyer, 2020), and the urban scale (Bassett, 2016; Blakey, 2020). It was mobilized as a critique of planetary urbanization (Grange and Gunder, 2019), as well as a renewed political aesthetic engagement with architecture (Sandin, 2013; Boano and Kelling, 2013; Oommen and Pal, 2015; Gage, 2019). In this variegated territory for the aim of the chapter, it is important to mention Pløger's work (2021) on the homeless and the occupy movement. In this work he sees very clearly that planning and politics cannot be neutralized and depoliticized. For Pløger 'planning is politicized through policies and de-politicized through regulations, plans, guidelines, and the hegemony of zoning' (2021: 2) becoming de facto agonistic (Mouffe, 2013) and dissensual (Rancière, 2010) as a practice that challenges the normal distribution of power building new, undisciplined and enabling alliances, capable of producing new subjectivities and triggering actions capable of destitution of its own power. Such work is echoed by Metzger et al. (2015: 3) who again recentred politics away from the drive of managerial governance aiming to 'highlight and grasp the glaring democratic deficits that appear to be generated in these contexts'. Situating their reflections with Rancière's post-foundational political thought adapted to cities in Europe, they refer to 'the fundamental distinction between society as an instituted social order and the impossibility of finding a definite foundation for any social order' (Metzger et al., 2015: 3). The authors read planning politics as 'the ultimate ungovernability of the heterogeneous and multifarious bundles of entanglements and partial connections that we choose to label as "societies", as well as the related necessary limits in space (Euclidean as well as relational) and time of any governance arrangement' (Metzger et al., 2015: 4). What is important in this post-foundational thinking – one without an *archè*, intended both as origin and command/intention – is not the rejection of the planning subject

and its strategic intention, but is an acknowledgement that such practice (Metzger et al., 2015: 13)

always excludes a part and hence stands to be disrupted from time to time. It does not at all preclude or reject spatial planning interventions, as these are as inevitable as the establishment of a police order, but argues for an awareness of the lack of definite foundations for such strategies.

In other words, planning process is somehow ‘unfinished’ (Pløger, 2021: 2) where ‘to see action as a work in progress, having new knowledge, change of lifeforms, ongoing dilemmas and conflicts – is to be unable to make a final decision, but to have the potential to strengthen critique’ (Pløger, 2021: 9).

Such a view, situating planning practice in the contingency of order and away from perfect consensual solutionism, allows for a dissensus and therefore for an alternative, a different imagining, a visioning and projection. In other words, such approach recentres immanence and brings back the discussion on themes of domination, control, commodification and communication typical of architecture and urbanism, ‘advancing a speculative claim that in the eyes of the majority could only appear naïve’ (Ronchi, 2017: 11) and makes reflections on planning as not an homogeneous practice but an heterogenous one, caught between fixed and overly determined futures and open and experimental transformative potentials; ‘whilst planning involves the search for a spatial plan, the current and dominant approach to planning displaces the ‘search for a plan’ with the ‘search for consensus on the plan. This is a subtle distinction but one that goes to the heart of the post-foundationalist political critique’ (Metzger et al., 2015: 14; see also Chapter 7 by Roskamm).

To illustrate such political modality, I will briefly recall some work that emerged from my engagement with the Baan Mankong housing and community upgrading practice and its regional expansion by the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) first in Bangkok and more recently in Myanmar. In this complex territory, the focus was to highlight the fragmented attempt to scale the claim to justice and inclusion at the city level, while acknowledging the different spatial practices developed by multiple groups of urban poor who have no part in city-making and speculate on a radical definition of active equality that is ‘presumed in the now’ (Davies, 2013: 5) and connecting to the conventional conception of distributive equality (May 2008) with Rancière’s radical politico-aesthetic.

As stated earlier, Rancière’s political struggle occurs when the excluded seek to establish their identity by speaking for themselves and striving to get their voices heard and recognized so that the many marginalized communities struggling for space, resources and nature can leverage their collective resources. The participants of the Baan Mankong programme and the ACHR upgrade funding programme, mirror Rancière’s idea of presupposition of equality as they locate the agency of change to the excluded, thereby creating a radical break from conventional participatory development practice and the environmental justice debate, both distribution-focused and recognition-centred. The Baan Mankong were exemplifying design politics (Boano and Kelling, 2013; Boano and Talocci, 2014) with a two-fold function, involving the material improvement of the urban poor as well as fostering confidence in marginalized groups by enhancing and encouraging their capacities, individually and collectively. Such visible actions illustrate Rancière’s ethics and politics of recognition. The Baan Mankong programme represents one of the most successful examples of urban upgrading at the scale of the city, making effective use of the available resources and enacting potentials by using the

power of the networks and collective savings, to spark off a new mode of urban production. At the same time, it is grounded in the aspirations of the new political collective subjects, manifesting and making visible alternative development pathways through design and architectural practices born in communal ethos and aesthetics of collective and environmental respects. A new aesthetics is put forward by the activity of Baan Mankong, one not belonging to the existing order; it is neither an 'aesthetics of poverty', nor a nostalgic vernacular one. The physical upgrading of informal houses and sites has a two-fold function for this historically marginalized group: improving the material reality of the urban poor; and beyond that, fostering confidence in their skills and capacities, individually and collectively (Boano and Kelling, 2013). The specific pathways of production of spaces through community architecture have several potentials. By re-composing contemporary, constructed ways of developing cities, the urban poor are emerging as actors of their own development, making their own history and enacting their own change.

Communities are not just simply invited to participate but become equal actors in the process. In this way, their inherent resilience is tested and verified allowing them to 'create a new political identity that did not exist in the existing order' (Rancière, 1999: 30). What clearly emerges in the presupposition of inclusion in the Baan Mankong programme is a critique of numerical teleology. Unlocking people's energy is achieved through strategic reconfiguration by taking existing identities and subjects and presupposing their equality. This drastically changes the status of individuals and communities, who are no longer simply invited to participate but whose power and agency are redistributed, thereby impeding the simple reproduction of police order that contributed to their marginalization in the production of cities and urban environments. The Baan Mankong programme offers a reconfiguration of collective struggles and mobilization, contesting the spatial ordering that assigns everyone and everything its proper place and highlights the importance of Rancière's thoughts on planning and power.

Similarly – but in a less organized and pacified manner – everyday practices of resistance of urban dwellers in peripheral Yangon – through incremental occupation, trespassing and building on vacant land – organized groups challenge the spatial order established by post/colonial regimes. These groups do not simply enact a repossession of the urban fringe to shape their own power over the urban neoliberal expansion process of international corporations and aggressive military industries, they literally contribute to the restoration of the commons in a gesture of inversion – whereas the commons can never be expropriated or appropriated but can only be used. In Yangon, I had engaged with Women for the World, a city-wide network of women's savings groups, supported by ACHR. From the mid-2000s, they started to collectively purchase large plots of farmland to build houses. As a collective, they managed to afford loans and obtain credit from banks. The fact that purchased land continues to belong to the government or farmers even after the purchase, resulting in ambivalent regimes of ownership, does not halt the housing process.

Individuals usually resort to leasing small plots of land through village leaders or other individuals who are managing the land. In some cases, minimal infrastructure already exists; in every other case the individuals of a household are responsible for acquiring materials and commencing the building process. Usually, people start out by constructing their unit with cheap and unstable materials that are gradually replaced by more stable ones, once the residents can afford to purchase them. This is a form of incrementality that is not linear, as it is often halted by a lack of certainty about the future, the continuous threat of eviction and

resettlement, and the lack of secure tenure. Women's mobilization in Yangon is not only aimed at securing resources. Collective savings develop financial and social capital (Astolfo and Boano, 2020) and enable a different relationship with government agencies in the hope of influencing planning and policy in the long term. What is interesting to note now is the changing relationship between state and communities as a result of the current transition, and how this is reflected in social mobilization and women's networks which are currently shifting from a quietly revolutionary encroachment (Bayat, 2000) towards more complex forms of co-management, co-implementation, co-financing and co-learning even if in a very precarious national transition.

Reflecting, briefly, on planning practices in Bangkok and Yangon, a different constellation of Rancière's ideas make evident a reconfiguration of power: far away from sovereignty, dominion and administration of bodies and their practices and close to space of struggle, *sensible*, a kind of *savoir-faire*, through equal voice when fighting any kind of exception caused by the police order in the public space and discourses. In Bangkok and Yangon, Rancière's politics arises in the irruption, on the scene, of those who are generally without a part in the world. Such practices, as many others ranging from revolt, manifestation and occupation to (Di Cesare, 2020) to proposition and participation (Grange and Gunder, 2019) define a 'topography' of resistance to police violence that 'conquers space, acquires power over bodies, examines and experiments with a new legality, redefines the limits of what is possible' (Di Cesare 2020: 12) and 'unveils the immunopolitics of public space'.

Those were the same spaces and practices Rancière sought to reflect on a new *partage* of the sensible, a new organization of bodies, speeches in a new configuration of spaces. Di Cesare (2020: 20) sees them as places where 'the politics of the state, of the institutions is questioned whether democratic or despotic, secular or religious, it brings to light its violence, it deprives it of its sovereignty'. In an intricate assemblage of motivations of 'an imprecise malaise, the manifestation of a nagging unease, disappointed expectations ... the abyss of inequality, the logic of profit, the plundering of the future, the spectacular arrogance of the few in the face of the impotence of the many' (Di Cesare, 2020: 21). Such events are where politics is. A specific 'politics of bodies' (Quintana, 2020) that manifest

injustice within the guarded confines of public space, reconfiguring it, a practice of irruption, which, coming from the edges, embarrasses governmental politics, exposes its police function that ... structures space, assigns parts, establishes competences in having, doing and saying. It fixes places to be occupied and regulates the faculty of appearance (Di Cesare 2020: 22).

TOWARDS A DESTITUENT POWER

Rancière's politics of interruption ~~becomes~~ *destituent*, as power is not anti-political or proto-political or even post-political. Rather, it takes us outside the traditional trajectories of the conceptualization of modern politics, outside the modern construct of the coincidence of politics and power, and therefore between politics and state. Destituent is a politics beyond the question of power, or rather not founded by power nor founded on power. It is a politics that

follows the opposite path, moving from the edges, breaking barriers, escaping the police function, and redeems its own name ... it shares the wrong, manifests dissent, and shines lights on the invisible and the unwelcomed. It also takes the part of those who do not have parts, denies the distribution, shows

the contingency of order, breaks the police hierarchy of the *archè*, which wants the monopoly of the beginning, which claims to have established the command (Di Cesare, 2020:23).

Destituent was used for the first time by the *Colectivo Situaciones* in Buenos Aires to describe the original features of the Argentine *piqueteros* movement of 2001 capable of bringing about real change in Argentina by delegitimizing the existing political forces (Laudani, 2016). More recently, the concept has found in Agamben a figure who expresses the full force of its political meaning. In his last instalment of the Homo Sacer project, *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben (2016: 273) suggests that a destituent power is one that 'deactivates something and renders it inoperative – a power ... without simply destroying it but by liberating the potentials that have remained inactive in it in order to allow a different use of them' and that 'while remaining heterogeneous to the system, had the capacity to render decisions destitute and suspend them' (Agamben, 2016: 274). Destituent power is configured as a way of practising and thinking about politics that radically breaks with the modern logic of sovereignty. Consequently, it can be seen as a radical alternative to constituent power in a time that is not that of control and sovereignty, but that of the immanent permanence, albeit in a potential form, of multiple and plural instances of liberation that do not find a solution in state institutions and somehow remain in *écarts* with respect to dominant forms.

This dislocates politics in a territory without foundations and serves to establish an initial qualifying point of destituent power – one that, as noted earlier, does not disregard the myriad subjectivities that reject political power. In other words, social movements do not simply position themselves against power, but at a distance from it: they dodge it. It is clear that in a certain type of demonstration and struggle over the last twenty years, that is, from the Los Angeles riots to the Arab Spring, to Ferguson and now in Yangon which have in common the desire to avoid any direct conflict with the established power, the dynamic of refusal is crucial, of absence, of the non-negative force of the negative, of the affirmative dimension of destruction, as a critique of everything that exists, according to that link between nihilism and politics. Destituent subjectivities are linked to an idea of politics without foundation (a politics without *arché*, that is, which feeds a conception of democracy as excess: democracy is always a democratic excess; what every democratic regime today intends to suffocate in the name of democracy), are a people (they are the people). They are the (im)popular, unexpected, uncounted, event of the people. An unexpected, unforeseen people, without conscience (there is no project), without head nor tail, which emerges unexpectedly in the struggle. Only a power that aggregates in this way can be a democratic power that escapes its democratic capture (democracy is never a matter of numbers). A destituent politics has a limited but precise task: to create the conditions, that is, the vacuum, so that another politics, the one that today seems impossible, can happen. It indicates the first movement to be made: to unleash a politics of the event, the event of politics nests in a singular desertion from what is, to break the normal course of history and produce a multiple, ecstatic plurality.

For Rancière there is politics only when there is no foundation, when radically egalitarian understanding of power is the enactment of equality. Destituent politics consists, rather, in the process that removes the foundation from a social order. And since an order always tends to stabilize itself and to represent itself as complete, rational and absolute, politics shows its conditional and fragile character. It takes place, in fact, in the interruption of an order, of its presumed naturalness: intermittent itself, politics is not always there, indeed it never is, it does not exist, but it takes place here and there as a disruption of an effective order.

A perspective of this kind poses many problems for political reflection; without soil, without a specific garment, be it the state, the territory, or power itself, it also lacks a subject in the form of a class, a people, or an individual that can guide an emancipatory process. Rancière does not rely on other disciplines but simply revives politics in its specific absence of content, seeking, in this absence, the virtuous efficacy of difference, of discard, of emptiness.

Rancière's power can be thought of as the power of emptiness. It is a void where references are not given but elusive, where coherence emerges but is not already given, where the arrogance of the canon, of the authorial, of the major is vulnerable and requires new forms of narration and subjectification (Boano 2020). Rancière helps us to think of and see power not only as conflictual and confrontational but as backlash, an (un)emptying that creates space for the possible. It is not another project that survives planning in order to deactivate and depose them but coincides with its own destitution for new plural instances of liberation, without synthesis of liberation, without synthesis or composition, questioning its very possibility.

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