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ARTICLE**NODE: “NEW FEMINIST MATERIALISM: ENGENDERING AN ETHIC-ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY”**

Cutting up the sensible

Rancièrian politics in a posthumanist perspective

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Abstract

Ethics and politics in a new materialist framework are key issues in current debates and spark research in a wide array of fields from matters of sex and gender to ecology and art theory. However, a definition of politics, and how it relates to democracy, is often left out of these discussions. This article addresses that issue through the theory of radical democracy and politics as rupture from Jacques Rancière's writings and draws a comparison with Karen Barad's notions of indeterminacy and onto-epistemology. Whereas Rancière takes as his starting point the definition of democracy as equality, Barad interrogates the world in its onto-epistemological condition. By developing points of intersection between these two theoretical approaches, the problem of politics in new materialism is discussed and some initial steps to take Rancière's work into the field of ontology and epistemology are sketched out. The focus is on the relationship between the Baradian “cut” and Rancière's “distribution of the sensible” and on how both illuminate possibilities of emergence rather than accessibility. The article concludes by addressing politics as possibilities for change.

Keywords

politics, agential realism, Karen Barad, Jacques Rancière, posthumanism

*Repartir lo sensible**Política rancièriana desde una perspectiva posthumanista***Resumen**

La ética y la política en un nuevo marco materialista son temas clave en los debates actuales y suscitan investigaciones en un amplio surtido de campos que van del sexo y el género a la ecología y la teoría artística. No obstante, la definición de la política y de cómo se vincula a la democracia suele dejarse fuera de estas discusiones. Este artículo encara esta cuestión a través de la teoría de la democracia radical y la política como ruptura, procedente de los escritos de Jacques Rancière, y establece una comparación con las nociones de indeterminación y onto-epistemología de Karen Barad. Mientras Rancière toma como punto de partida la definición de democracia como igualdad, Barad cuestiona la condición onto-epistemológica del mundo. Al desarrollar puntos de intersección entre estos dos enfoques teóricos, se debate el problema de la política en el nuevo materialismo y se plantean algunos primeros pasos para llevar la obra de Rancière hacia el terreno de la ontología y la epistemología. Concretamente, se establece una relación entre el «corte» de Barad y la «división de lo sensible» de Rancière, ya que ambos revelan posibilidades de emergencia más que de accesibilidad. El artículo concluye planteando la política como posibilidades de cambio.

Palabras clave

política, realismo agencial, Karen Barad, Jacques Rancière, posthumanismo

The question of politics and ethics is a challenging one in a new materialist and posthumanist perspective, with these terms frequently invoked in matters of sex/gender, social responsibility and eco-critic debates. Yet these terms themselves are far less frequently interrogated. What is meant by politics and the political and what is the relationship with questions of ethics and responsibility? Today, we are far from understanding politics only as what regards the “polis” or the state or the government. In Judith Butler’s work, for instance, the question that appears to be repeatedly posed is “What does it mean to be a person, to be human or to be acknowledged as such” (Butler, 2001, p. 621). As Vikki Bell puts it, for Butler her political stance is her ethical stance, namely one of responsibility towards the other (Bell, 2008, p. 401).

In a response to “Anti-racism, multiculturalism and the ethics of identification” by Drucilla Cornell and Sara Murphy, Elizabeth Grosz urges us to shift our attention from what she terms identity politics to a “politics of imperceptibility”. Crudely put, instead of a politics of recognition and identity formation through the affirmation of others, we should ascribe to a politics of acts, of the impersonal, of forces. This gesture, she states, seeks to counterbalance the Hegelian strand of recognition that underpins a long tradition of thinking and wide array of feminist theory with a Nietzschean imprint, in which the being of becoming is central rather than the becoming of being. Grosz also emphasizes how forces are always in contestation, with each force seeking to expand and subdue, subvert or convert other forces (Grosz, 2002).

Crucially, this understanding involves a more dynamic concept of politics — one in which the human does not hold a privileged position (Grosz, 2002, p. 470). Thus, it calls attention to the challenge that a posthumanist understanding poses to many conceptions of politics, namely that the question of being human, and being recognized as such, is no longer adequate for defining politics. My aim with this article is to outline some preliminary convergences between the theories of Jacques Rancière and Karen Barad that I believe can be developed into a useful framework for thinking politics in a posthumanist perspective.

The politics of matter

Drawing on the theories on quantum indeterminacy of the physicist Niels Bohr (1885-1962), Karen Barad develops an understanding of boundaries and properties as not inherent to an object but instead continually produced as effects of material-discursive practices. By observing the paradox that although light and matter will behave as waves in one experimental setup and as particles in another, they cannot simultaneously be both, Bohr concluded that things do not pre-exist measurement; rather, phenomena are the results of specific experimental setups. Thus, in this account, the apparatus — the method of measurement — is of crucial importance (Barad, 2007, p. 104-105, 118-119).

Barad expands Bohr’s findings by pointing to the limits of his realizations: the apparatus is itself a phenomenon and is to be

understood in much broader terms than just as the experimental setup in a laboratory: “*Apparatuses are not mere observing instruments but boundary-drawing practices — specific material reconfigurings of the world — which come to matter*”. Phenomena are relations without pre-existing relata — the boundaries and properties of the components of the phenomenon are produced in what Barad terms the intra-action (Barad, 2007, p. 139).

To observe anything (and indeed to engage in any intra-action), it is necessary to enact a “cut” — a distance between the apparatus and the measured property of the phenomenon, that is, a cut between subject and object, between the observer and the observed. This cut, however, is contingent (not absolute, as in the Cartesian division between subject and object) and also enacts agential separability — the condition of exteriority within phenomena — and a causal structure among the components of the phenomenon (Barad, 2007, p. 140). Due to this causality, it makes possible a reproduction of the specific observation. This, therefore, as a localized version of knowledge and scientific objectivity, replaces an absolute version without falling into arbitrariness and without disabling the possibility of objectivity. However, it also implies that for anything to come into existence it has to partake in intra-actions in which cuts are enacted that produce boundaries. Centrally, then, the existence of something is constituted by its exclusions — everything cannot be at once, but must be enacted into being, and by choosing one option of measurement or intra-action, one will necessarily exclude a variety of others. In Barad’s posthumanist account, agency is not reserved for the human condition, and we are not the only ones who continually produces agential cuts. All of this can be performed by everything, including “dead” matter (Barad, 2012, p. 32). Indeed, the boundary between human and non-human, living and dead, is itself a boundary that, like all boundaries, has to be drawn and redrawn continually.

We are not confronted by this wave-particle paradox in our daily, “macroscopic” lives. Indeed, Bohr’s theories of indeterminacy have been largely overlooked by classical physics for the better part of a century (Barad, 2012, p. 385). However, according to Barad, the complementarity exists everywhere, but material-discursive practices function iteratively to generate what we experience as a relative stability. Matter, including ourselves, again and again performs causal intra-actions, and again and again produces phenomena, thus producing and reproducing the world in its becoming (Barad, 2012, p. 393).

I want to pay special attention here to the notion of the cut and to emphasize that, within this theory, the cut is not only a necessary condition for causality and scientific objectivity — it is simply unavoidable. We cannot not make cuts. It is not a bias but an ontic condition. In everything we do we intra-act, constitute boundaries and draw lines between subject and object. But it is equally important to highlight the contingencies of cuts. The computer that I am using for this article can be both part of the subject, the apparatus, when I use

it to write my paper, or it can be the object of my actions if I choose to move it from one spot to another. It is never a determinately part of either subject or object, but can only be that within an intra-action, as part of a phenomenon.

The order of the world as such is therefore in continual production: it is constantly done and redone. From a different perspective, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière arrives at a similar conception. He, however, builds his theory around the notions of democracy and entitlements, with a rather rigorous definition of politics.

As his point of departure Rancière takes Plato’s musings on seven entitlements to rule, among them age, birth and wealth, but also one he ironically calls “God’s part”. It is the lot of fate or chance — what Rancière understands as democracy in a radical sense (Rancière, 2004, p. 5). In this polemical stance, democracy is the scandalous “power of the people with nothing, the speech of those who should not be speaking, those who were not really speaking beings” (Rancière, 2004). Thus, the radical condition of democracy is founded on a principle of initial equality between everyone (or everything, one might add). There is, therefore, no rightful entitlement to rule.

However, according to Rancière, this also founds a paradox. In Aristotle’s formulation of the citizen, it is a being that is at once the agent of an action and the matter which that action is exercised upon. This contradicts the conventional logic of action in which an agent possesses a specific capacity for producing an effect on an object, which, in turn, is apt for receiving that effect (Rancière, 2010, p. 29). Indeed, to act means to initiate, as in the Greek word *arkheir*: to begin, to lead and eventually to rule. If one is leading, then there must be those who are led (Rancière, 2010, p. 29-30). Keeping Barad’s agential realism in mind might be helpful here, as temporary subject-object relations are continually constituted through “cuts”. However, that is in contradiction with the notion of radical democracy in which everyone rules at the same time. Within the anarchic situation of this democracy, an order will always be established; in any ruling or action, in general, someone (or something) will eventually lead.

Interestingly, in the Rancièrian understanding, the exercise of the *arkhê*, the ruling, is closely connected to what is sensible, that is, visible, audible, sayable and so on. He calls this ruling order the *police*, which is a specific “distribution of the sensible”. It is not to be equated with actual police as we initially understand it, but should be understood as a symbolic constitution of the social which allows some things to appear and make others invisible. Crucially, this order does not allow for a supplement or void, it claims to “count all the parts” of a society (Rancière, 2010, p. 36). The distribution of the sensible is also one that ties modes of being and doing to specific groups or groupings and, at the same time, makes this order seem natural, normal and just. The police is business as usual: in Baradian terminology, it corresponds to the practice of constituting boundaries as though they were natural or inherent to an object or a group (such as sex, race or class).

The paradoxical situation of democracy is itself what makes politics possible, as understood by Rancière. Politics is a rupture in the logic of the police, an interruption in which the contingency of this “normal” logic is pointed out; at the same time politics breaks with the idea of the possibility of just distribution, and thus draws attention to the basic lack of entitlement that characterizes democracy. Centrally, Rancière points out that the political subject comes into being only through this action and, furthermore, that political action cannot be equated with the exercise of power (Rancière, 2010, p. 27).

Essentially, Rancière’s conception of politics is one of the disruption and breaking of a specific logic. He uses the term *dissensus* to designate this process, namely that of shifting the current distribution of the sensible and bringing new subjects into visibility and speakability. An interesting point in his work is the division between the domestic and the public spheres. Central to the existence of Aristotle’s political being (which is human, but is definitely not all humans) is the capability of *logos*, speech. Categories excluded from this order, for instance women, slaves, animals, are only able to express noises, cries of pleasure or displeasure. The domestic sphere is thus one from which no *logos* can emerge, and to relegate beings to this space effectively means dismissing them from the ruling order. The political aspect of these categories lies in qualifying their spaces as places in a community from which understandable discourse can emerge.

An equivalent to Barad’s attention to matter’s performativity is not present in Rancière’s work, which takes as its starting point ancient writings on politics. Where Barad speaks of onto-epistemological conditions, Rancière focuses on interrogations of definitions of what constitutes the common, being undeniably more attentive to the specific human agents entailed. Nonetheless, Barad’s and Rancière’s conceptions of visibility, or sensibility, of the world do converge to a large degree. Things and groups have to be brought into existence (Barad) or sensibility (Rancière). They do not pre-exist the actions, although there is a difference at the level of ontology here. Jane Bennet has further argued that, despite Rancière’s own reluctance to think of politics as something which can include the nonhuman, it could be possible to do so (Bennet, 2010, p. 106-108). This engenders the possibility to think of politics in terms of impersonal forces instead of identity and recognition.

Using the discussion of sex determination as an example, there is thus an essentially political imprint in the feminist interrogation of scientific practices. The studies by Anne Fausto-Sterling on intersex persons and the existence of multiple sexes instead of only two¹ profoundly rework the distribution in which there are only two valid categories — a distribution that claims to be objective, natural and exhaustive. Likewise, the work of Cheryl Chase in favor of intersex people’s rights, demanding that they themselves get the choice in

determining (or not determining) what sex they are or want to be, qualifies the voices of people to make decisions regarding their body, rather than be subjected to “expert” opinions in infancy and be surgically assigned a sex within the male-female binary (Chase, 1998, Rosario, 2009). Although this is taking Rancière’s theory somewhat far away from the realm in which he writes, one might indeed say that an experiment that shows matter (traditionally understood as particles) to exhibit wave behavior could be seen to have political aspects. By opening up a new field of the sensible, it makes visible that which, until then, had no reason to be seen and also disrupts the logic and demands a profound reworking of notions of being and becoming.

Ethics and consensus

If politics is a *dissensual* activity, Rancière goes on to designate *consensus* as being established by the police and as effacing the litigious character of politics. Consensus is not, then, the peaceful and respectful discussion and agreement among parties but, instead, an erasure of the fact of disagreement and of the contingency of the current order and its constitutive outside. Further on, Rancière somewhat polemically uses the abstraction of consensus to analyze ethics, or what he calls the ethical turn of politics and aesthetics.

In Rancière’s terminology, ethics consists in equating between modes of being and modes of doing and making norms appear as facts, which is, essentially, the restoration of the order of the police and the denial of the contingency and possibility of a supplement. Rancière understands the word *ethos* in the following way:

Before signifying a norm or morality, the word *ethos* signifies two things: both the dwelling and the way of being, or lifestyle, that corresponds to this dwelling. Ethics, then, is the kind of thinking in which an identity is established between an environment, a way of being and a principle of action. (Rancière, 2010, p. 184)

Lyotard’s writings on the “other” is an example of this ethical turn; according to Rancière, Lyotard ascribes to a subjection to the law of the other as something radically other, unmasterable and impossible to understand or respond to (Rancière, 2010, p. 191-192). Comparing this to Barad’s notion of ethics as responsibility — as derived from Emmanuel Levinas — there are two things worth noting: in her understanding, ethics needs not be founded on stable (id)entities, and the other is always entangled, never radically outside. Barad, then, following Levinas, sees ethics as a condition of being in the world: it is not subsequent to action as a rumination on morals and values, but a central part of existence itself. Thus, she adds it as yet another

1. See, for instance, Fausto-Sterling, 1993 and 2000.

component to her worldview in the term ethico-onto-epistemology. Ethics is always a central part of knowing and doing; we cannot escape it, nor should we try. “Ethics grounds human experience (not the other way around)” (Barad, 2007, p. 391):

What is on the other side of the agential cut is not separate from us — agential separability is not individuation. Ethics is therefore not about the right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part. (Barad, 2007, p. 393)

The proximity of the other, and not a radical alterity, thus forms the basis of this ethical understanding; we are always entangled and differences are temporary and contingent — the products of differential intra-actions and not inherent properties. The ethical consists of accounting for our intra-actions, paying attention to the effects of the cuts we make.

Even the smallest cuts matter, and therefore Barad locates responsibility in a full accounting of the apparatuses and practices that produce specific phenomena, including what is excluded (Barad, 2007, p. 390-391). Here, with Rancière, one might contrast this notion of a full accounting with the idea that no such thing can exist. It can never be exhaustive and by definition we cannot know what did not come to be or to be seen. Rancière’s view stresses the possibility of politics and attentiveness to the quarrel over the sensible itself by stating that an order exists only to the exclusion of others, which indeed is in line with Barad’s theory. Making space for the political does not entail rejoicing in a state of consensus, but being open to a multiplicity of new things.

In bringing these two views together I am neither trying to conflate them, nor to privilege one over the other. On the contrary, I wish to initiate a dialogue — to read diffractively, one might say. Rancière’s theory can be expanded with Barad’s notion of onto-epistemology tied up with questions of physics and materiality and attentive to material constraints and matter’s performativity. Likewise, Rancière’s notion of politics as rupture seems a useful supplement to Barad’s ethics, in that it provides a rigorous conception of politics that does not ascribe it with qualities of identity and does not demand a pre-emptive understanding of what exists. It inquires into specific possibilities for change in the way it stresses cuts that are new to the current order or logic: it makes new subjects appear and engenders new modes of visibility and sensibility. For Rancière, politics is not simply something

which matters or is important. Politics is essentially a term designated to describe possibilities and processes of change, in which there are dynamic relations between the inside and outside of the symbolic order of the police. As Rancière states, the promise of change lies in the fact that “politics is a local, precarious, contingent activity — an activity which is always on the point of disappearing, and thus perhaps also on the point of reappearing” (Rancière, 2004, p. 8).

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