Production and Distribution of the Common

A Few Questions for the Artist

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Essay – February 6, 2006

According to Michael Hardt, the production of the common is the most important economic mainspring in a time in which immaterial and biopolitical production are dominant. By connecting economics, politics and aesthetics and analysing their relations, Hardt arrives at questions concerning the role of the artist and the meaning of his or her work in the distribution of the common.

The relation between aesthetics and politics is most often conceived in terms of their intersection or, rather, the intervention of one into the domain of the other: political action in art or aesthetic practices in politics. This relation poses no great conceptual difficulty, although, of course, at least since Plato, such intersections have raised for many serious practical concerns, about the stability of the political, for example, or the integrity of aesthetic practices. Jacques Rancière *[en.wikipedia.org - Jacques Rancière (born 1940) is a French philosopher, Professor of Philosophy at European Graduate School in Saas-Fee and Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris (St. Denis) who came to prominence when he co-authored Reading Capital (1968), with the structural Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser.]* poses the relation between aesthetics and politics instead as a conceptual problem. He is not primarily concerned with political art or aestheticized politics, but rather the ways in which in parallel at an abstract level activity in the two separate domains operates a distribution or sharing of the common. Rancière's approach becomes even more powerful once we add to it a recognition that the production of the common is becoming increasingly central in today's biopolitical order. Exploring these conceptual connections allow us to pose some challenging questions for artists and perhaps open up new avenues for the politics of art.

For Rancière the link between aesthetics and politics resides specifically in what he calls 'the distribution of the sensible' (*le partage du sensible*). 'I call the distribution of the sensible,' he explains, 'the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of the common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.' [1] The common (*le commun*) is a technical term for Rancière that is foundational for his conception of both the political and the aesthetic, although this fact is unfortunately somewhat obscured in the English translations of his work. [2] It is relatively easy to recognize in terms of the distribution of the sensible a precise, formalist definition of aesthetics that is very close to the standard practices of artistic production: artistic practices are ways of doing and making that both reveal what we share in common and divide or distribute its elements in the realm of the sensible. In the case of the visual arts, for example, artistic practices simultaneously disclose in the visual fields what we share (such as our ways of seeing) and operate divisions within the visual and partitions between the visible and invisible. Note how the two meanings of *partage* – sharing and dividing – operate simultaneously here.

It may be less obvious how Rancière's definition applies equally to politics. The distribution of the sensible, he explains, reveals who has a share or a part in the common.[3] For politics, in other words, the sharing and dividing refers to a community's common wealth, goods, resources, knowledges, as well as its offices and powers. Politics, we might say in more conventional terms, involves the decisions over our rights or entitlements to (and hence the distribution of) what we potentially share in common. 'Politics begins,' Rancière writes, 'precisely when one stops balancing profits and losses and worries instead about dividing the parts of the *common*, and evening out according to a geometrical proportion the parts of the community and the titles to obtain those parts, the *axiai* that give one right to community.'[4] Rancière's notion of politics resides in the relation between 'the part' and 'the common,' which is mediated by the operation of *partage*, simultaneously dividing and sharing. The common, of course, is not the realm of sameness or indifference. It is the scene of encounter of social and political differences, at times characterized by agreement and at others antagonism, at times composing political bodies and at others decomposing them. Rancière thus establishes not an immediate link between politics and aesthetics, but a parallel operation they both enact on the common.

The Production of the Common

Before articulating some of the questions raised by Ranicère's conception, I must focus briefly on the production of the common. In recent years many theorists in different fields have revived notions of the common (often in English with an 's' as 'the commons') in order to analyse and challenge economic doctrines of privatization. The historical analogy that such uses of the commons generally draw on is the process of enclosure at the dawn of the capitalist era when first in England and then throughout Europe the common lands and the common woods, which were used for animal grazing and gathering wood, were transformed into private property and fenced off. The defenders of the commons in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England often relied on Christian arguments that God gave the earth and its bounty to humans that they should use it in common. Nature should never cease to be common, they insisted; its parts may be distributed but must always remain shared. In some contexts today the discourse on the common engages situations very consistent with those in the earlier period, when contesting, for example, the privatization and sale of common or national resources such as water, gas, diamonds, or oil. All must have access, such arguments go, to land, water, fuel and other necessary resources; and the profits from other resources, such as oil or diamonds, must be shared in common, most often through the authority of the nation-state. The analogy is also used in the realm of cybertechnologies and immaterial property, bolstering arguments, for example, to preserve the 'information commons' or 'cultural commons'. The notion of the common functions similarly in these cases as a critique of how assigning property rights to immaterial goods prevents them from being shared. The difference here is that the common goods in question, such as information, cultural products and code, are not natural. Most of these discourses, in any case, focus on not their artificiality and the processes of their production, but rather access and distribution, treating 'the commons', even when the historical analogy is not invoked, as something quasi-natural or at least given.[5]

Rancière's notion of the common, although he develops it primarily through ancient Greek political thought rather than via this English historical analogy, functions in a very similar way. When politics and aesthetics begin, according to his notion, the common already exists and thus the central question is how its parts are to be shared, divided and distributed. No longer today, however, can we consider the common as quasi-natural or given. The common is dynamic and artificial, produced through a wide variety of social circuits and encounters. This recognition does not negate the importance of Rancière's notion of *partage* and the common, but rather extends it further to account also for the production of the common. In addition, this perspective allows us, or forces us, to consider the economic realm along with the political and the aesthetic. There we can recognize how

the production of the common is emerging today as the dominant economic mode.

The Dominant Form of Production

Explaining the hypothesis that the production of the common is becoming central to the contemporary economy requires taking a step back to recount some well-known trends in economic history. [6] The hypothesis rests on a claim that we are in the midst of a shift of the dominant or hegemonic form of economic production from the industrial to the immaterial or biopolitical. It is not controversial to say that for at least the last 150 years industrial production has been dominant over all other forms of economic production. This dominance was not expressed in quantitative terms. When Marx proposed the dominance of industrial capital, for instance, in the mid-nineteenth century most workers, even in England, the most developed capitalist nation, were not in the factories but in the fields. Industrial production was dominant instead in qualitative terms, that is, insofar as its qualities were imposed over other forms of production. Mining and agriculture, for instance, had to industrialize by adopting industry's methods of mechanization, its divisions of labour, its wage relations, its discipline, its time precision, its working day, and so forth. All forms of production throughout the world and social relations themselves gradually were forced to adopt the characteristic qualities of industrial production.

It is not particularly controversial either to propose that, at least for the last few decades, industrial production no longer plays this hegemonic role within the economy. Remember that this is not a quantitative claim: there may be equal or even larger numbers of workers in the factories considered worldwide, even though their location is shifting dramatically from the dominant to the subordinated parts of the world. The claim instead is quantitative: that the qualities of industry are no longer imposed over other forms of production.

The potential controversial element of the hypothesis that Toni Negri and I put forward is that industry is gradually being replaced in the dominant position by what we call immaterial or biopolitical production. With these terms we group together various sectors of the economy in which are produced goods that are in large portion immaterial, including information, ideas, knowledge, languages, communication, images, codes and affects. Immaterial production thus includes not only a series of symbolic and analytical tasks at the high end of the economy, such as software programmers and financial analysts, but also a variety of occupations at the low end, such as healthcare workers, flight attendants, legal secretaries, fast-food workers, and call centre workers. Note that the term immaterial here refers primarily to the products rather than to the labour processes – labour in these as other cases is still characterized by mixtures of manual and intellectual, corporeal and cognitive practices. Note too that the products in question are most often not entirely immaterial. Information, ideas and code, for instance, always have some material aspect. Instances of affective production too involve material products – healthcare workers stitch wounds and fast-food workers serve hamburgers – but they include also and even primarily a large affective component, creating a sense of well-being, being friendly, and the like.

Our hypothesis, then, is that we are living through a period of transition in which these forms of immaterial production are becoming hegemonic in the economy, which means, to repeat, not that they will become most numerous, but that their qualities will be progressively imposed over other forms of production. Industry is becoming increasingly informationalized and image-oriented; information in the form of the germplasm of seeds is becoming increasingly central in agriculture; and, in a general way, the temporalities of industry, with the strict division posed by its working day, are being replaced by temporalities that characterize these forms of immaterial production, which increasingly blur the division between work time and non-work time, undermining the boundary between work and life often through precarious forms of labour relations. These newly

dominant forms of production bring with them sometimes new and often severe modes of suffering, alienation and exploitation, which all require fresh analyses and organized strategies of resistance.

The Generating Effect of the Common

For the purposes of my argument here the central element of this hypothesis is that it posits as central to the economy the production of the common. The immaterial products in question, first of all, do not generally operate according to a logic of scarcity as do material commodities. If I use an automobile or a house you are prevented from using it, but my using an idea or an image does not imply any such exclusion. In fact, sharing ideas and images is required for them to be productive so that we can create more ideas and more images in an expanding spiral. The production of scientific knowledge, for example, requires open access to a wide range of scientific ideas and methods. Advances in scientific knowledge are produced on that common basis and, in turn, the new knowledge must be made common through conferences and journals. That dual relation to the common – as basis and result – also characterizes the production of other forms of knowledge as well as that of images and various immaterial goods. The centrality of the common is perhaps even more explicit in affective and linguistic production, which cannot take place without social relations. These are immediately and necessarily *social* forms of production, which constantly rely on and generate the common. In all of these cases, making the products private, and thus taking them out of the common, undermines their productivity.

In the most general terms, these forms of production are aimed at the reproduction or generation of forms of life. Instead of thinking of the endpoint of capitalist production in terms of commodities, in other words, and considering capital as a thing, this forces us to consider capital as a social relation, as Marx suggested, and to recognize capitalist production as the (re)production of social relations. Commodity production seen in this light is really just a midpoint in the production of social relations and forms of life. It would be essential at this point to investigate how capital interacts with the common, finding ways to command the production of the common and to expropriate the common wealth produced. For my argument here, though, I simply want to emphasize the reason for calling this *bio*political production, since the production of the common is immediately the production of forms of life.

Biopolitics

The reason for calling this bio*political* production is that, in the context of the production of the common, the characteristics that are conventionally thought to isolate economic production from political action tend to break down. Hannah Arendt, for instance, conceives of work or economic production as an instrumental activity typical of the commodity production of the factory. Work is thus exhausted in the utility of its product. Political action, in contrast, which for Arendt is typified by speaking in the presence of others, is not exhausted in its ends but rather is a continually open sphere of communication and cooperation. The division for Arendt relies, in part, on the relation to the common: whereas political action and political speech animate the common world we share, economic production is excluded from the common or, rather, only has access to a distorted version of the common through the reified sphere of market exchanges.[7] Even if we are to accept Arendt's division in the context of industrial production, clearly the terms shift in the case of immaterial production, where the economic takes on the qualities that she identifies with the political. Even though capital continues to impose instrumentality, immaterial products are not exhausted in their use. The affects created in a service relationship, for example, or the images and ideas created in an advertising campaign always exceed the instrumental goal capital sets for them. Furthermore, such production is characterized by language and speech, which Arendt identifies as central to the political.

Recognizing the biopolitical nature of contemporary economic production does not imply that the economic and the political have merged but rather, similar to the way Rancière poses the relation between aesthetics and politics, the two domains are linked in the way they are both oriented towards the production of the common, that is, the creation of social relations and forms of life. In addition, our brief analysis suggests that the talents and skills generated and employed in biopolitical economic production tend to be the same as those required for political action. This does not mean, of course, that those engaged in biopolitical production are immediately acting politically but rather that they *can* act politically, that they have the necessary capacities. This claim has great significance for the possibilities of democratic participation, which will have to be explored elsewhere.

After this long detour to establish the centrality of the production of the common in economic terms, I am in position to return to Rancière's insights and add a further link to the connection he proposes, creating parallel relations among the aesthetic, the political and the economic, all of which are oriented towards the common. When he poses the connection between aesthetics and politics in the way they both operate a *partage* of the sensible and thus a sharing and division or distribution of the common, Rancière treats the common as if it were a given or relatively fixed element. When we emphasize the fact that the common is not natural but made and thus shift our focus to its production, these definitions shift slightly. Politics involves not only the distribution but also the production of the common, that is, the production and reproduction of social relations and forms of life, which highlights its correspondence with biopolitical production in the economic realm. This conception emphasizes the creative nature of not only artistic practice but also economic production and political action, emphasizing the capacities, skills, and talents required for creation. [8] All three domains – art, politics and economics – are thus linked via the common and oriented towards the production of social relations and forms of life.

Questions for the Artist

One consequence of posing the relation in this way is that it casts in a new light the role of art and artists in relation to economic production. City and regional governments throughout Europe, for example, and to a lesser extent elsewhere, recognizing the decline of their industrial base and the increasing dominance of biopolitical production, are seeking to brand themselves as 'creative cities' and court artists as key elements to constructing a 'creative class.' [9] Along the same line, art biennials, which have proliferated in recent years, serve as a mode of city branding in the effort to capture some of the profits of the creative economy. Art promotion and patronage, of course, has long served as an emblem of prestige for state power, but now artistic practice is gaining a much stronger relation to economic production. The existence of artists in a city or region and the demonstration of social conditions that facilitate artistic production are not only seen as symbols to attract the development of biopolitical production, but also thought to function in that development, cultivating circuits of biopolitical production. Parallel to my claim that the talents and skills of biopolitical economic production are the same as those required for political action, here we can see that the capitalist planners recognize that the skills and talents for artistic practice are increasingly the same ones required for economic production. This increasing economic centrality of art and artistic practice can be beneficial to artists, of course, but can also involve them in unintended ways in capitalist development projects.

Some artists are developing this relation to economic production in very different ways, based on the fact that they increasingly share labour conditions with a wide range of workers in the biopolitical economy. In France, for example, the *Coordinations* of the '*intermittents du spectacle*' (organized workers in the entertainments industries, such as television, film, dance and theatre), who conducted widespread protests from 2003 to 2007 to maintain their right to a continuous income even though they sporadically work on short contracts, recognized that an increasing portion of the labour force in France works under similar precarious labour conditions. The *Coordinations* thus expanded their demands and called for a continuous, basic income for all French workers, linking their struggle with that of other precarious workers. [10] This seems to me an exciting avenue for developing the increasingly parallel relation between artistic practice and economic production.

These parallel analyses bring me back once again to the relation between art and politics and raise a series of questions. What possibilities are opened in the biopolitical context by the recognition that artistic practice and political action are both engaged in the production and distribution of the common? Does this relation provide a means for artists to participate, through their artistic practice, in the many contemporary political struggles around the world in defence of the common, for an equitable distribution of the common, and for autonomy in the production of the common? If, as I claimed earlier, the skills and talents required for biopolitical economic production also apply to political action and the creative capacities of artistic practice are the same needed for economic production, then is it similarly true, to complete my set of three parallel relations, that increasingly today abilities developed in artistic practice are those required for political action? How can such artistic skills and talents be deployed in a democratic project of the defence, production and distribution of the common? My brief analysis of the parallel relations among the aesthetic, the political and the economic allows me to pose these questions but does not yet arrive at any responses. I suspect that artists are more qualified than I to respond and I imagine that in their work they are already discovering answers to these questions.

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Footnotes

1. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, translated by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 12, translation modified.
2. Gabriel Rockhill offers a helpful footnote to explain that since 'the common' is awkward in English he substitutes for it various noun phrases, such as 'something in common' and 'what is common to the community', and adjectives such as 'shared' and 'communal' (Ibid., 102-103, note 5).
3. Ibid. See also Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, translated by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 26-27, original: *La mésentente* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), 48-49. Note that Rose translates '*partage du sensible*' here as 'partition of the perceptible'.
4. Rancière, *Disagreement*, op. cit. (note 3), 5, translation modified, emphasis in the original (*La mésentente*, 24).
5. On the historical analogy, see Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
6. For more detailed exploration of the hypothesis of a passage of the dominant economic form from industrial to immaterial or biopolitical production, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 107-115; and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Havard University Press, forthcoming).
7. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
8. The characterization of art as not only the distribution but also the production of the common resonates Deleuze and Guattari's notion of art as the creation of percepts and affects. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 163-200.
9. The writings of Richard Florida have been a central inspiration for many of the governmental efforts to make creative cities. See, for example, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
10. See Antonella Corsani and Maurizio Lazzarato, *Intermittent et précaires* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2008).

Tags

Aesthetics, Biopolitics, Commons, Labour

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