

'Constellations of singularities'

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**'Constellations of singularities': the rejection of representative democracy in Coney's *Early Days*
(of a better nation)**

There has been a crisis. There has been a revolution. The dictator has been overthrown. The country lies in ruins. The nation is divided with the people from the Plains and the Islands mindful of their own resources, and the people from the City desperate for help. We wait in line. I am given a postcard from my mother in the city and am led into a debating chamber where the spokeswoman of the people from the city, Angela, updates us on the current situation. The Islands have food, the Plains have Power supplies, the City, once the driving economic centre of the country, lies in ruins and has very little of anything. Hospitals are inadequate throughout the country, there is need of mass vaccination, security is virtually non-existent and so power supplies and food are both under threat. The International Security Council (ISC) has offered to send in peace-keeping troops but the cost of this to the country's independence and sovereignty is not clear. Angela asks us to share our own stories which are indicated on the postcards we hold. We have been invited to a national meeting of the three regions and there we must decide, as a nation, whether or not to accept the help from the International Security Council. Angela is clearly keen on this course of action and from the perspective of a city dweller I can't see that we have much choice. We are led into a large hall where we meet the representatives of the other two regions and are informed that we have only a limited time to decide whether or not the ISC should be invited in. Debate ensues; some people say a lot, some, possibly most, say nothing. There is intermittent commentary from the news reporter who is both present and on screen to the watching world. The debate is chaotic and runs out of time. Forced to a vote of yes, no, or abstain, we decide, narrowly, to reject the ISC in favour of building a ruling coalition that will maintain the country's sovereignty. I have cast my vote for the ISC but to no avail. We must now decide, not what to do in government but, before we even get that far, how our decisions on what to do are going to be made. We now had to decide how to decide.

Coney's production, *Early Days (of a better nation)*, was an interactive performance that was developed in consultation with academics from the Department of Political Economy at King's College, London and academics at Warwick University. The show previewed in 2014, when I attended my first show on November 15th (matinee), as a person from the Plains, at the Oval Theatre in London, and toured nationally throughout the following spring. The second time I attended, as a person from the City, was at Warwick Arts Centre on 12th May 2015. The insights I gained from my two visits have been further enhanced by generous interviews afforded to me by Annette Mees, co-director of the production, and Astrid Breel, a researcher attached to the project, both of whom were able to give me access to outcomes of performances that had turned out very differently from the ones I attended, a broader sense of audience response and reaction across the tour, and insight into the aims and expectations of the creators of the work. Mees was very clear that one of her principle aims for the project was 'to get audience together to talk about big ideas'; and that a 'successful' show for her was 'not about how far they get, but the quality of the debate within the process' (Mees, 2015). Speaking to researcher Astrid Breel, who had compiled and analysed almost 100 audience questionnaires from those taking part in the London performances, there was plenty of evidence to suggest that many participants had indeed valued this opportunity to take part in political debate, and some had expressed their intention to continue doing so in the future (Breel, 2015a). For someone like myself, who spends much of their time involved in political debate of one kind or another, this aspect of the piece was less significant than what the two outcomes I directly experienced suggested to me about the limitations of a certain tendency which was becoming increasingly prevalent in contemporary left-wing political theory and radical philosophy. And that unique shape of my own response to *Early Days* is specifically what I would like to share in this article.

The options that arose from the debates that followed the rejection of the International Security Council's offer of help were whether we would devolve decision-making to a single leader, a committee made up of representatives from each region, or whether each individual would retain a

vote on every decision. In both cases I voted for the second option of representational democracy; in London, we ended up with one person one vote; in Warwick, we ended up with a bit of a mess. A chairperson who would orchestrate decision making seemed to arise from an inconclusive and rowdy process without it being clear how that had come about and without anyone volunteering to take up that particular role. A reluctant chair was duly appointed, by some process that I was unable to follow, and was then ignored and made irrelevant throughout the second half of the show which proceeded in the seeming absence of any system whatsoever. Both of these experiences offered an opportunity to witness and analyse a decision making process in action that is rare to experience in democracies and their institutional organisations, both most often governed by political systems where individuals vote for representatives, who then populate institutional structures to vote – in principle at least – in accordance with the wishes of a majority of their electorate.

Over the last decade or so there has been a discernible scepticism in Europe towards such institutional democracy and representational party politics which began with the convergence of mainstream left and right wing parties in consolidation of the current neoliberal hegemony, and has been recently intensified by the threat to democratic sovereignty waged on Greece, among other European nations, by the *troika* (the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The rise in grass roots direct action campaigns and seemingly leaderless mass movements such as Occupy, have been inspired by and, in turn, have continued to invoke, a leaning in radical political philosophy that tends towards a networking of disparate acts of multifarious resistance as opposed to organised and ideologically-coherent revolt or political opposition. In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri draw on Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of 'a new context, a new milieu of maximum plurality and uncontainable singularization' (Hardt and Negri 2000, 25). Hardt and Negri argue that resistance to global capital can no longer be mounted by an identifiable mass movement of 'the people', as envisioned by Marx, but rather by what they call a multitude that is made up of 'constellations of powerful singularities' (61) that are able to subvert and redirect the creative agency, that global

capital has afforded them for its own purposes, towards unanticipated and uncoordinated – and so undetectable - acts of rebellion. Consequently, Hardt and Negri propose that *'this new militancy does not simply repeat the organizational formulas of the old revolutionary working class'* (412-13 original emphasis); and conclude therefore that *'revolutionary political militancy today ... must rediscover what has always been its proper form: not representational but constituent activity'* (413 original emphasis). Without wishing to overly conflate complex political discourses that share as many distinctions as similarities, it remains notable, in contemporary political theory and radical philosophy, how this pervasive emphasis on singularity has correspondingly led to a critique of the desirability of co-ordinated mass resistance emerging from a coherent and organised community. Communities, in the work of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, have been for some time, inoperative (Nancy 1991); always deferred even as they are articulated, significant primarily for their capacity to, as Nicholas Ridout proposes, open the individual to 'the experience of encounters with others' in order to mark 'simultaneously the limit of one's self, and the place where one's self, such as it is, begins' (Ridout 2013, 10). In the work of Jacques Rancière, communities become 'uncertain' (Rancière 2004, 36), drawn together only by their shared capacity for readership or spectatorship of the aesthetic object or 'third thing', yet whose constituent members remain apart from each other by virtue of their unique interpretation. Indeed Rancière is explicit in his understanding that the collective political potential of any audience

does not stem from the fact that they are members of a collective body or from some specific form of interactivity. It is the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventure that makes her similar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other. (Rancière 2009, 16-17)

Rancière's notion of a political potential that relies not on collective, predetermined response to artistic intention, but on individual and undetermined responses to aesthetic stimuli, has been particularly influential within much of the re-thinking of the political that has occurred in theatre and performance studies over the past decade, making appearances in recent monographs by Alan Read (2008), James Thompson (2009), Maurya Wickstrom (2012) and Nicholas Ridout (2013) among many others. For Rancière, and those who draw on him, a political theatre that seeks to effect a political outcome is guilty of maintaining the position of mastery that a truly democratic politics should seek to disrupt. Like the 'stultifying pedagogue' who stands in opposition to Rancière's ignorant schoolmaster, the artist who would seek to effect a particular political outcome is placing themselves in the role of the one who knows what is needed and who has the authority to transmit that knowledge to others. By doing so, they are denying the spectator their equal right to an independent and active interpretation of the third thing (the performance itself); an interpretation which must be entirely detached from any causal connection to the artist's intended meaning.

Rancière, I think, despite his scepticism of an over-simplistic understanding of interactive performance (Rancière 2009, 62), would have approved of *Early Days*, as the performance framework provoked a *dis-sensus* in that each spectator had to dis-identify from a role which was more usually prescribed and directed by the artist, in order to construct a new part which manifested an essential equality with all other parts of the playing cast – actors and audience. In the broader understanding of dissensus the framework also sustained dissonance amongst its fragmented audience; posing questions that had no easy or right answers, with actors provoking dissent rather than driving towards consensus, and a technological authority that forced necessarily unsatisfactory and inoperative resolutions by the insistence of the ticking clock. Whilst each performance offered the same three act structure; the first act spent deciding whether or not to invite in the International Security Council, the second act spent deciding how to decide, and the third act deciding where to allocate the insufficient national resources, the outcomes of each were not designed by the artists to achieve any particular political effect in conclusion, but were entirely

down to the actions of the audience on the night. In her analysis of the different modes of participant agency at work within *Early Days*, Astrid Breel (2015b) distinguishes three broad categories; reactive, interactive and proactive, explaining that proactive agency can be understood as the most powerful as it tends to work against the affordances, or in Gareth White's (2013) terms, the frames of invitation, that have been given. Breel (2015a) gave an account of an instance of proactive agency during one performance she had attended where the audience had mistakenly believed the show to be rigged, that the invitation was, in a sense, a lie, and that they were not being afforded the agency they had been promised. As a result the audience turned on the actor playing the media commentator – in a significant sense the narrator and one of the few artistic givens of the performance – and shut him out of the playing space, attempting to take over his microphone and technology to broadcast their own show from that point on.

It is clear that, within Rancière's philosophy, such proactive agency has the greatest political potential as the spectator thereby rejects all the roles they have been offered by the artist, or schoolmaster, to disrupt the distribution of the sensible that the performance framework has established and re-write the co-ordinates of the experience, rather than merely working or re-acting within the institutional framework they have been offered. Yet, while the particular outcome cited by Breel might suggest revolutionary potential, proactive agency in itself, as I will now demonstrate, has no political colours and by the very premise of Rancière's philosophy, any political effect such agency has must be unanticipated, and cannot be prefigured, motivated or inspired.

Returning after the interval to the third act we were faced with a projection of the financial situation: how many tokens it would cost to vaccinate the nation, how many tokens for hospitals, how many tokens for food, how many tokens for security and how many tokens for power. The total required to pay for everything was well over the total number of tokens we had to spend. On the floor was a map of the nation with the regions marked out and token stations located at strategic points with indications of the total number of tokens needed to sort that particular problem. Decisions needed to be made. Priorities needed to be identified. Paying for power might seem to

benefit the people on the Plains where the power sources were situated, but power was needed by the whole country. But what use was putting money into power, if there was no security to protect the sources of power from rebel attacks? If money went into both power and security, then there was insufficient left to pay for hospitals and food. Many sensible options were suggested, but the decision making structures decided upon by the audiences in both performances I attended were simply not up to the job. In the London performance, with no structure in place at all, those who shouted loudest entered into what philosopher Jürgen Habermas would term strategic dialogue, simply attempting to win their case, barely listening to other options, while most of resigned ourselves to silence and the seemingly inevitable collapse of our nation. The one vote per person system concluded in everyone being handed a token which they could place on the token station of their choice. But without any strategic overview, how to make best use of this limited agency? If I put my one token on a station that required three, and no-one else put their tokens there, then my token was wasted. My agency, as an individual, as a singularity, was defeated by the lack of consensus, the lack of leadership, the lack of structure within which my voice could meet with other voices to debate how we might collectively make the most of the resources we had. I wanted a voice and had been given a token and the agency at my disposal only reached as far as choosing between a wasted token on a hospital that wouldn't be built, or a vaccination that I thought was the least of the priorities given the situation.

At the performance in Warwick, the chairperson who had been forced to take the role was overwhelmed by the situation. A smaller audience than in London, and one where many of the participants were known to each other from the West Midlands theatre community, the debate became raucous and anarchic. Because there was no system in place to hold or allocate the tokens, the breakdown in dialogue led to someone simply grabbing a pile of tokens and placing them all on a hospital, claiming that this was now their own private hospital – a carnivalesque echo of the purchase of public services by private business initiated in the UK by the Thatcher government. Another instance of proactive agency – going beyond the choices we had been given – resulted in

the theft of many of the remaining tokens going into a participant's pocket. The confrontation that ensued at this individual criminal act then took up all the remaining time we had to save the country until the energy supplies ran out, as we had been warned they would, and we were plunged into darkness.

Prompted by Breel's questionnaire to consider if my political views had changed in any way I was forced to admit that both my experiences had simply strengthened my preference for clear leadership and institutional systems of governance over more collectivist or anarchic models be that in political organisations or performance processes. Beyond my own personal predilection, however, the outcomes I had experienced in *Early Days* illuminated some of the real paradoxes that seemed to lurk behind the seductive rhetoric of the philosophers noted above. Again, this is not to flatten out the intricacies of such work nor deny its political currency. Moreover, I am not intending to conflate philosophical theory directly with theatrical practice, but simply to propose that the anxieties of participating in Coney's work led me to return to such philosophy with questions that had now been refined by my direct experience within forms of governance that had lacked the kind of authority also treated with suspicion by the philosophers in question. And in this return it appeared clearer to me that there was a paradox at the heart of much of this work. For these philosophers, and those scholars who draw on them, seem, on the one hand, to tend, understandably, towards a libertarian reaction against the old left, against state-socialism and its totalitarian tendencies and ideologically conformist communities; favouring instead the emancipation of singular subjectivities which can serendipitously converge in unanticipated constellations of disparate points of resistance. Yet it is notable, on the other hand, how often these uncoordinated points of resistance are envisaged – implicitly or explicitly – by the philosophers in question as converging on a common aim, that being the subversion or disruption of global capital. Yet if each singular response is not led by any ideological or artistic intention, if the proactive agency that erupted at various points of *Early Days* was not invited by the affordances of the performance structure itself, then the consequences of such agency cannot be politically calculated or directed. In

one instance, a small collective within the overall audience had decided on revolution; in another, an individual had taken the neoliberal opportunity the breakdown in order had afforded him and introduced privatisation as an unforeseen and unanticipated co-ordinate of the debate. In a third, an individual had undertaken a criminal act, and broken the rules of the game for purely personal gain. Perhaps it's not entirely fair to blame philosophers for the failure of real 'singularities' to live up to their theoretical promise, but what was particularly interesting for me in reflection on my experience was the seemingly unresolvable tension that was illuminated in philosophies, such as Rancière's, between the position of ideological preference that he expresses throughout his *oeuvre* (the desire for global capital to be challenged or subverted) and a thesis which explicitly refrains from persuading individuals towards that political end. The imperative is rather that each should use their political agency to disrupt the current coordinates, or distribution of the sensible, in an entirely self-directed way, which could as easily result in newly configured coordinates for global capital to seize on, as newly configured coordinates that might subvert it. For those who follow Rancière and perceive the notion of effect, or ideological agency, within art practice, to be either misguided or illusory, this is a self-evident risk of artistic activity – it is, in fact, the only, or the best, politics that art can do. But for this particular spectator, what my experiences in *Early Days* illuminated for me, precisely through the audience's failure on either occasion to offer a better form of government than the one of which I already despaired, were the limitations of the over-hasty rejection of systems of authority or competency that Rancière's philosophy might sometimes be seen to imply; a throwing out of the potential of progressive ideologically-driven leadership with the bathwater of failed state socialism, or a throwing out of the potential of representational governance with the bathwater of failed European democratic rule at the present time.

Significantly for a scholar invested in both theatre and politics, these thoughts arose not only from the form of the theatrical praxis I participated in on those two occasions, but also from a thinking-through of theatrical praxis more generally in terms of the authority that was absent in this particular model. The piece was thus, for me, an ideal research and development space for

experientially thinking through models of political participation. If *Early Days* had been a representational drama that demonstrated through fiction that leaderless revolution would fail, such a play would have always remained a merely subjective account, or even straw target, that was easy to dismiss, one writer's opinion given authority only by their right to pronounce their chosen narrative in a public cultural space. The opportunity presented by *Early Days* was to watch, or experience, the failure at work in real time, to witness, not actors undertaking the parts of failure that had been strategically scripted for them, but people who were, mostly, trying to succeed, and yet failing spectacularly, nonetheless. The point of the piece on its own terms, as Mees and Breel both indicated, may well have been to maximise creative agency or the freedom to fail, rather than to lead to any particular political outcome, but where the piece succeeded for me was in its capacity to gesture to precisely what the performance seemed – on the nights I attended – both politically and artistically unable to achieve.

What was required artistically and politically for the outcome that I desired, despite the aims of the piece, was much less choice, much less improvisational space, and much less freedom. More top-down structural constraints from the company and the imposition of a decision making system with clearer and fewer choices to be made might have resulted in time being freed up to investigate in more depth the implications of those choices and the opportunity for meaningful debate. All experienced theatre makers know that improvisations work best when they are structured by rules. The command 'improvise' leaves an actor flailing in too much freedom; give the actor rules – you can only use these three words, you can only move in straight lines, you must stand when the other actor sits – enables creativity to function, even enabling the creativity to break the rules that have been given, an impossibility if there are no rules to break in the first place. Perhaps this is precisely the insight that theatre praxis has to offer the current field of radical philosophy and political theory, the counterpoint to Rancière in that it is sometimes- perhaps most often - an understood and fully consensual upholding of the distribution of the sensible within the rehearsal or performance space that leads to the most successful outcome. The director is not a dictator, but they have a specific

role that is drawn from their privilege of sharing the perspective of the spectator, for whom the performance is made. The actors are not prevented from fully participating in the creative process, but while testing out material they are freed from an otherwise split perspective of performing and attempting simultaneously to view the whole. Rancière's theory is politically invaluable in its insistence that these roles – and others – should be open to all, and interchangeable between all. Moreover, he never insists that the role of schoolmaster should be abandoned but only that the schoolmaster (or director, or artist) remains ignorant and willing to learn, to encourage the contribution of the other. I would argue that this sits quite comfortably with the fact that both artistic and political praxis can make very good use of temporary or strategic authority to propose and organise collective structures and direction; and an overemphasis on uncoordinated singularities to the detriment of this possibility is good for neither politics nor art. The best constellations of singularities might, at the end of the day, be most likely to emerge in well-structured improvisations, led by an experienced and trusted director; and political revolutions – as the turn towards socialism in parliamentary systems across Europe may yet demonstrate – might be more likely to have the desired political effect and lead to 'better nations' if harnessed by those given the democratic authority to lead than left too much to unpredictable and disparate interventions.

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