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Access Beyond Developmentalism: Technology and the Intellectual Life of the Poor

Essay by Lawrence Liang, September 11, 2009 in response to A Dialogue on ICTs, Human Development, Growth, and Poverty Reduction

In February 2009 we invited the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere to Delhi for the release of his book “Nights of Labour” which we had translated into Hindi, and to have a conversation with a group of young writers and practitioners at the Cybermohalla (“CM”) in Dakshinpuri. The Cybermohalla is one of three media labs that have been set up in different working class colonies in Delhi where young people living in the colony meet, engage in conversations and write about their neighborhood, technology, media, culture and life in the city. Almost six years old, the CMs were set up as experimental spaces to explore ways of looking at the relationship between technology and the urban poor beyond the lens of developmentalism. The CM is presently involved in documenting intellectual life in their neighborhoods and the transformations brought about by media.

In this brief note I would like to raise a few critical questions about the dominant ICT and Development discourse that dominates policy and NGO circles, and I will be using the writings of Ranciere, the CM practitioners, and the conversation between them as the grounds on which to raise these questions. Ranciere began his career as a labour historian, and had initially set out to do a straight forward history of class consciousness in the labour archives outside Paris. What he found surprised him, and informed his philosophy of education and I believe has immense significance for people working on ICT, poverty and development. Ranciere’s rethinking of labour history paves the way for us to start thinking seriously about the hidden domain of aspiration and desire of the subaltern subject, while at the same time thinking about the politics of our own aspirations and desires.

Ranciere goes into an unexplored aspect of the labour archive of nineteenth century France, where he starts looking at small, obscure and short lived journals brought out by workers, in which they were writing about their own lives. But they were not necessarily writing about their work, or their condition as workers. And if they were , they were not writing about it in glorified terms but with immense dissatisfaction. Instead they were interested in writing poetry, philosophy and indulging in the pleasures of thought. They looked enviously at the thinking life that intellectuals were entitled to. At the same time, intellectuals have always been fascinated with the world of work and the romance of working class identity. Ranciere says “what new forms of misreading will affect this contradiction when the discourse of labourers in love with the intellectual nights of the intellectuals encounters the discourse of intellectuals in love with the toilsome and glorious days of the labouring people”

Ranciere’s motley cast of characters include Jerome Gillard, an iron smith tired of hammering iron, and Pierre Vincard, a metal worker who aspires to be a painter. In other words, a series of sketches of people who refused to obey the role sketched out of for them by history, people who wanted to step across the line and perform the truly radical act of breaking down the time-honored barrier separating those who carried out useful labour from those who pondered aesthetics. He says that “A worker who has never learned how to write and yet tried to compose verses to suit the taste of his times was perhaps more of a danger to the prevailing ideological order than a worker who performed revolutionary songs… Perhaps the truly dangerous classes

are not so much the uncivilized ones thought to undermine society from below, but rather the migrants who move at the borders between classes, individuals and groups who develop capabilities within themselves which are useless for the improvement of their material lives and which in fact are liable to make them despise material concerns."

While we ordinarily think of development in terns of an improvement in the material life and living condition of people, it seems from Ranciere's account that this was not enough. What the workers wanted was to become entirely human, with all the possibilities of a human being which included a life in thought. What was not afforded to works was the leisure of thought, or the time of night which intellectuals had. This is not to say that an improvement in the material conditions of life was not important. On the contrary it was crucially important, but if we are also recognize inequality as being about the distribution of possibilities, then it is futile to maintain a divide between material and intellectual life. The struggle in other words was between time as a form of constraint and time as a possibility of freedom. For Ranciere, a worker then was someone to whom many lives were owed.

If we were to translate what this means for our understanding of ICT and the subject of development, we find that most interventions frame the poor as objects of the discourse of digital access, and they are rarely seen as the subject of digital imaginaries. How do we think of the space created by ICT as one that expands not just the material conditions but also breaks the divide between those entitled to the world of thought, and those entitled to the world of work? In other words, what is the space that we create when we frame the discourse of 'digital divides' only as a matter of technological access? How do we begin to look at the technological lives of people beyond developmentalism and take into account the way it changes aspirations and subjectivities?

Suraj, one of the writers at CM, in his conversation with Ranciere says "The capacity of my intellectual life always competes against my imagination. Exploration for me consists of recognizing the continuous pull by others around me (the constant movement), which propels me to the imagination of an intellectual life which always seems to be beyond me." What this statement forces us to think about is the fact that we all lead intellectual lives, but the distribution of opportunities to lead an intellectual life is unequal, and we need to think through the history of materiality also as the history of conditions which divide people on the basis of those who think and those who work, or the division of time between the days of labour and the nights of writing. It would be tragic if we were to recycle clichéd ideas of the real needs of the elite and the real needs of the subaltern. The development sector seems to have inherited a certain anti intellectualism on the grounds that it is elitist and the left have failed to engage with such desires on the grounds that they were 'false consciousness'.

But as Ranciere says "What if the truest sorrow lay not in being able to enjoy the false ones." Ranciere argues that politics has always been about a distribution of the sensible or sensibilities (and this is certainly evidenced in political discourse as well as the critical discourse on technology where we find metaphors of 'visibility', 'silence' as a way of thinking about the political condition of the underclass). While the focus of the Harvard Forum has been appropriately on the correlation between ICT and poverty alleviation, it is also important to remember that these technologies (computers, mobiles, DVD players) are also a radical redistribution of the sensible. All of a sudden you have a vast number of people whose access to the world of images, texts and sounds have dramatically increased. At the same time they are engaging with the world of the sensible not just as passive consumers but actively producing, sharing and thinking through these new ephemeral forms.

We could ask questions about the larger change that a small experiment like the CM has been able to bring about. Do these young writers have the ability to change the world, is the model sustainable, etc.? The answer would be yes, but perhaps not in the way usually imagined by funders or NGOs. They have already changed the horizon of the possible by reinventing

themselves and claiming their space in the world of thought. This also involves a radical rethinking of the very idea of equality itself. The liberal assumption is that equality for something we strive, in other words that we move from inequality to equality. But what if we were to start with equality itself.

Starting from equality does not presuppose that everyone in the world has equal opportunities to learn, to express their capacities. We recognize immense inequalities in the material conditions of life, but we also recognize that there is always some point of equality when we think of each other as thinking beings, and to think of the process of learning, not as a moving from ignorance to knowledge but as a process of going from what is already known or what is already possessed to further knowledge or new possessions.

It in this context that we also have to recognize that ICT technologies are a serious redistribution of the means of thought and expression. When Victor Hugo, a sympathizer of the working class, was shown a poem written by a worker, his embarrassed and patronizing response was “In your fine verse there is something more than fine verse. There is a strong soul, a lofty heart, a noble and robust spirit. Carry on. Always be what you are: poet and worker. That is to say, thinker and worker.” This is a classic instance of what Ranciere would term as an ‘exclusion by homage’. Thus, the aspiration and desires of the poor have to be ‘something more than fine verse’; the information needs of the poor have to be more than wanting to watch a film or even dreaming of becoming a film maker.

These injunctions certainly tell us more about the fantasies of the state, of the intellectual and of NGOs than they do about people participating in the new realms of the digital, and if we are to avoid collapsing all ICT interventions into ‘exclusions by homage’ then we also need to start thinking about the new landscape via the intellectual possibilities that they hold, and the many lives that they enable. After all, the poor are also those to whom many lives are owed.

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