Theory

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

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In February 2009, we invited the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere to Delhi for the Hindi-language release of his book *Nights of Labour*[1] 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 to 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.[2] The CMs are presently involved in documenting intellectual life and the transformations brought about by media in their neighborhoods.

In this brief note, I would like to raise a few critical questions about the ICT and Development discourse that dominates policy and NGO circles, and I will use the writings of both Ranciere and the CM practitioners, as well as the conversation between them, as the collective grounds upon which to raise these questions.

Ranciere began his career as a labor historian, and had initially set out to do a straightforward history of class consciousness in the labor archives outside Paris. What he found surprised him and informed his philosophy of education. I believe it also has immense significance for people working on ICT, poverty, and development. Ranciere's rethinking of labor 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 labor archive of 19th 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. They were not necessarily writing about their work nor about their conditions as workers. And if they were, they were not writing about those things in glorified terms, but with immense dissatisfaction. Instead, they were interested in writing poetry and philosophy, and indulging in the pleasures of thought. They looked enviously upon the thinking life that intellectuals were entitled to. At the same time, intellectuals have

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1. *Ranciere, J. (1989).* The Nights of Labour: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France. *Philladelphia, PA: Temple University Press.*
2. *By* developmentalism, *I am referring to the state-driven initiatives toward modernization adopted by most postcolonial countries. These initiatives have focused on adopting technological policies that would ensure that developing countries "caught up" with the West, and people were seen as the passive recipients of various welfare policies.*

always been fascinated with the world of work and the romance of working-class identity. As Ranciere says:

> [W]hat 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. (pp. x–xi)

Ranciere's motley cast of characters includes Jerome Gillard, an ironsmith tired of hammering iron, and Pierre Vincard, a metalworker who aspires to be a painter. In other words, he presents a series of sketches of people who refused to obey the role staked out 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 labor 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. (p. xxix)

While we ordinarily think of development in terms of an improvement in the material life and living condition of people, it seems, from Ranciere's account, that this was not enough for the 19th-century French. What the workers wanted was to become entirely human, with all the possibilities of a human being, including a life in thought. What was not afforded to workers was the leisure of thought, or the time of night that intellectuals had. This is not to say that an improvement in the material conditions of life is not important. On the contrary, it is crucial, but if we are also to 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 the notions of 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 are 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 in the discourse of digital access; they are rarely seen as the subject of digital imaginaries. How do we think of the space created by ICT as one that not only expands 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, taking into account the way it changes aspirations and subjectivities?

Suraj, one of the writers at CM, says the following in his conversation with Ranciere:

> 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. As such, we need to think through the history of materiality also as the history of conditions that divide people on the basis of those who think and those who work, or that divide time between days of labor and 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 has failed to engage with such desires on the grounds that they are "false consciousness." This is best exemplified in the difference between documentary films in India and popular entertainment. Documentary films have always focused on abject poverty, often seeing their subjects only through the lens of piety, rarely capturing them as thinking subjects. 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 in the critical discourse on technology, where we find metaphors of "visibility" and "silence" presented as ways of thinking about the political condition of the underclass). While the focus of the Harvard Forum has appropriately been 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 has dramatically increased. At the same time, they are engaging with the world of the sensible not just as passive consumers, but as active producers, 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? 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 is something for which 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 and 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. We should think of the process of learning not as 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 is in this context, we also have to recognize that ICT technologies are a serious redistribution of the means of thought and expression. When Victor Hugo, a sympathizer with 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 an "exclusion by homage." Thus, the aspiration and desires of the poor have to be "something more than fine verse," and the information needs of the poor have to be more than wanting to watch a film or even dreaming of becoming a filmmaker. 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 digital realms. If we are to avoid collapsing all ICT interventions into "exclusions by homage," then we also need to start thinking about the new landscape in terms of the intellectual possibilities that it can hold, and the many lives that it can enable. After all, the poor are also those to whom many lives are owed. ∎