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Staging Citizenship: Performance, Politics, and Cultural Rights

Jesús Martín Barbero | Colombia

Politics has been theatrical performance since its origins, as Richard Sennet reminds us when he writes that the *polis* space in the *Agora* was a place where people gathered to exchange opinions and relish in debate. That is why *Staging Citizenship*, the name of this Hemispheric Institute Encuentro given by its organizers in Colombia, is so provocative and performative: citizenship exists only insofar as it is *enacted*, and its emerging figures have to do with *empowerment strategies exercised in and from the cultural sphere*. What the new social, ethnic, gender, gay and lesbian, religious or ecological movements demand is not only ideological representation but also socio-cultural recognition. They seek to become visible in their difference *as citizens*. This opens up a new mode for the political exercise of their rights, since this new visibility catalyzes the emergence of new political subjects. This was the subject visualized by feminism when it subverted the Left's profound *machismo* with its slogan: "the personal is political!" which came to embody both a sense of injury and victimization and a sense of recognition and

empowerment.

The visibility of the Other—and every difference is an opportunity for dominance in a class-based society—together with the diversity of each contested identity today (contested not only in relation to other identities but in relation to itself) is a constitutive part of the recognition of rights. This is expressed in the phonetic similarity and semantic articulation of *visibilidad* (visibility) and *veedurías* (community oversight committees): those practices of investigation and intervention by citizens in the public sphere. According to Charles Taylor, the notion of recognition is played out in the distinction between traditional “honor” as a hierarchical concept and principle, and modern “dignity” as an egalitarian principle. Identity is not, then, what is attributed to someone by simply belonging to a group, but rather the narration of what gives meaning and value to the life and identities of individuals and groups. What the notions of *diversity and interculturality* mobilize today is the breakdown of a political institutionality unable to extend cultural rights to all sectors of the population, be they women or ethnic minorities, evangelicals or homosexuals. In regards to the citizenship of “modern man”—which was conceptualized and exercised *above and beyond gender, ethnic, racial, or age differences*—democracy today needs a cultural mutation that enables it to handle a heterogeneity that is as constitutive of citizenship as it is constitutive of the State. This is the only way we will escape the illusory quest for the reincorporation of alterity into some unified *whole*, be it nation, political party, or religion. *Citizenship rights*, those rights exercised today by the different cultural communities that constitute a nation, will then take center stage. This is the *new value* that attributes the human universality of rights to the specificity of its very diverse modes of perception and expression.

Performed citizenship is that which makes itself visible—which is materialized and embodied—in *performances*: those “action arts” that, stepping outside Art’s space and time, *invert* cultural memories and expressions by revealing that they are not just products but rather experiences that link memory to invention. As Francisco Cruces says, “Language is the result of speaking, dance is the result of dancing, music is the result of playing and singing.” And because cultures are already that—not essences or authenticities, but *performative* knowledges and meanings—today the rituals and *fiestas*, the theatricality of marches, the parodic spectacle of protests, or the aggressive nature of tattoos, can be a constitutive part of social revindications, cultural resistances, political sabotages, identitarian transfusions, and aesthetic subversions.

What can academia and research do with all this? They can leave restrictive disciplines behind and begin to listen ethnographically to everything that speaks, screams, curses, makes noise, blasphemes, at the same time as it inaugurates, invents, energizes, liberates, emancipates, and creates. We are being compelled to think in a new way—one that, amid the frenetic globalization that threatens cultures, demands that we “reconstruct our local meanings,” even those belonging to the most globalized practices

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and dimensions of social life. Every cultural interaction is always carried out by *situated* actors, and the meanings of enacted practices or reclaimed rights will ultimately lead us to social *uses* rooted in time and space. From this perspective, we discover that social ways of knowing do not exist simply to be accumulated and transmitted, but to *be exercised* as citizens, to be enacted performatively. And few countries today need this exercise more than Colombia, which is anesthetized, polarized, and paralyzed by countless fears expertly billed as "security"—a security that mistakes amnesty for amnesia, that passed itself off as "democratic" so it could cease to be *social*. But this Colombia still has rights, among them the right to hope the Hemispheric Encuentro of Performance and Politics, which will take place across its territory, engages many citizens to act as such by reimagining this country and reinventing it performatively.

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