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Culture versus Politics? Strikes in the Entertainment Industry in France
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Through my work on the historical reception of Molière in France, I’ve been exploring the vicissitudes of cultural inheritance and the role theatre, in particular, plays in the ongoing construction of national identity. It has always struck me as interesting, however, that the theatre — clearly so central to the collective identity of a nation (and in the West probably nowhere more so than in France) — is by its nature a problematic art both aesthetically and morally, as the long history of anti-theatricalism in all its forms attests. Indeed, one of the foundational questions of our research group is: Is theater the proper medium for the supporting a national/cultural identity?

But if theatre poses certain problems as the site of articulation and disputation of national identity, I am led to ask about the function of actors and within this schema. Actors are both fundamental to theatre and the site of its most potentially disturbing features. The actor stores the behavioral traditions of the culture, is keeper of the nation’s most-treasured literature, and becomes the face of that culture to the world. Conversely, the actor is traditionally devalued and mistrusted. He is seen as a mere interpreter, not a creator; the actor has an unstable identity, is physically and

psychologically plastic, confused by and with the fictitious entities through which he earns his living – when he does earn a living! Paradoxically, a society finds some of its most treasured legacies in the hands of a species of artist that is imputed to be aesthetically weak, psychologically unstable, morally suspect, and materially parasitic. With the actor at the center of its art, theatre, as bearer of national identity walks, so to speak, on very shaky legs.

Within the past year and a half, France has faced huge cultural upheavals sparked by mass protests on the part of workers in the entertainment industry. These protests forced the cancellation of individual performances and festivals all over France. In what follows, I offer a brief *response* to the events as I summarize them in order to suggest what, if anything, might be learned from the issue of the entertainment industry France about the actor as player in national culture.

In France in the summer of 2003, workers in the entertainment industry staged mass demonstrations, forcing the cancellation of individual performances and entire arts festivals. The protests followed on the heels of government attempts to reduce unemployment benefits for workers in the entertainment industry. On the one hand, the issue of entertainment workers reflects a problem affecting all of France's employment sectors, namely, how to sustain social welfare benefits as the country faces increasing economic pressures. In another sense, the crisis reveals the complex imbrications of economic, social, and political factors that reside at the heart of cultural

policy in France. While the theatre is given exceptional support in France (materially and ideologically), attitudes that surfaced around the protests and emerged in the mountain of press reportage, commentary, and analysis reveal the limits of that support and expose tenacious, historical prejudices about the actor that continue to lurk behind even the most enlightened appreciations of theater and its role in shaping national identity.

In France, those working on a job-by-job basis in theatre, television, film, radio and related arts are usually hired under an employment contract as an *intermittent du spectacle* (a term roughly translated as “casual entertainment industry worker”). The special status of this contract benefits both employers and employees. It allows actors and stage technicians, for example, to collect unemployment benefits according to a plan that takes into account the very sporadic nature of their work, thus providing show business workers some financial stability and allowing them to pursue their careers despite the inevitable precariousness of their employment. For the employer, hiring workers under this contract relieves them of some of the hefty costs of providing full benefits for employees and allows an alternative to the *C.D.I.*, the coveted permanent employment contract given to most French workers and its accompanying job protection and long-term benefits.

The cost of providing unemployment benefits to the *intermittents*, however, has steadily increased over the years as the number of people employed under the contract has grown. By 2003, the gap between unemployment contributions and payouts for *intermittents* grew to some 828 million Euros, more than one quarter of the accumulated

deficit in France's unemployment system. As early as 1992, attempts were made to reform the benefit scheme; these were met by mass demonstrations. In June of 2003, following up a promise on the part of the Minister of Culture Jean-Jacques Aigallon to address this nagging issue, an agreement revising the benefit schedule for *intermittents* was reached between the government and several (but significantly not all) of the syndicates representing different factions of both employers and employees. Approval of the agreement, announced on June 26, set off mass demonstrations by those opposed to the plan, who, through public disturbance and appeals to solidarity, succeeded in causing the cancellation of performing and visual arts events in Paris and other parts of France.

Given how obviously necessary it was to do something about the unemployment system deficits, it may seem that such resistance to change on the part of *intermittents* was merely the selfish attempt of a privileged group to hold on to generous benefits at the expense of French taxpayers and health of the French economy. But the case is not that simple. A glaring fault in the logic of the reforms was the reality of widespread abuse by employers in making use of the *intermittents* contract, particularly employers in television and radio, where the state-owned audio-visual sector (television stations France 3, France 2, and Radio France) employed the greatest number of *intermittents*. Thus, instead of reserving the contract for artists and technicians whose livelihood was truly precarious, the ranks of *intermittents du spectacle* swelled to include armies of receptionists, secretaries, and others whose jobs were far and away not in the spirit of the employment status as it was conceived for the benefit of show business workers.

Reforming the benefit scheme, therefore, became necessary in large part because of terrible abuses, often by the state itself. Yet, the reforms as they were designed would hurt *most* those who were genuinely deserving of the benefits. Is not surprising that the protesting crowd was made up of large numbers of theatre actors, in disproportion to the number of people that comprise the ranks of the *intermittents du spectacle*.

By the end of summer 2003, the strikes had racked up an impressive list of cancellations, including the theatre festival at Avignon, the dance festival at Montpellier, the jazz festival at Tours, and the film festival at Marseille. The event also resulted in mountains of press coverage, commentary, and analysis about those who came to be called, mockingly, the *interluttants* (a portmanteau of *intermittents* and the verb *lutter*, to struggle or fight). The problem of the *intermittents* inspired an outpouring in the press – collective soul-searching on issues that cut to the heart of French beliefs about the history and meaning of their cultural policy, social welfare, equality, and the market economy.

I experienced the force of these issues first-hand. I was sitting in the orchestra at the Comédie-Française on Sunday evening, July 13, 2003, waiting to see a production of Molière's *Le Malade Imaginaire* when the performance was cancelled in response to the call of hundreds of protesting *intermittents* amassed on the *Place Colette* outside the theatre. Inside, the general manager of the Comédie-Française, Marcel Bozonnet, informed us that the performance would indeed be cancelled. What ensued was nearly two hours of heated exchange between members of the audience and Monsieur Bozonnet and the actors still costumed for that evening's performance. Equally heated

exchanges took place between audience members. The impromptu debate lasted nearly two hours. Through it I was privy to a forum of raw opinion, passionately expressed by those who would not be writing for the pages of *Le Monde* or *Nouvel Obs*. What I heard that evening at the Comédie-Française was a crude but representative sample of attitudes that would, in the weeks and months to follow, emerge in the press by the erudite and expert. Against a background that included hurling blame at just about everyone and everything (Anglo-Saxon influence, socialists, liberals, former Minister of Culture Jack Lang) there clearly emerged negative stereotypes of actors and, as I especially noticed, an implied but recurrent theme that somehow actors did not have the right to strike. In the notes I wrote up immediately following the event, I recorded my impression that even for those who sympathized with the plight of the *intermittents*, there seemed to be resistance or discomfort about the very idea of actor as activist, about their status as social agents. It seemed to me to reflect attitudes against actors taking off the mask, stepping out of character, ruining our illusion. It was a kind of *betrayal*: havoc was being wreaked by those who should only entertain, those of the “non-productive” sector of society, those who produce “les signes inutiles,” as Jean Baudrillard wrote in an article for *Libération* that July analyzing the problem.

The resistance to the idea of actors and social agency was summarized masterfully in an article by Evelyne Pieiller in *Le Monde Diplomatique* at the end of 2003. Analyzing the prejudices about artists embedded in the discourse of the French press, she points out that, in the vast quantity of reporting on the issue, the press and its commentators returned obsessively to certain images and metaphors. She noted that

although *intermittents* included all entertainment industry workers from a variety of sectors, the press paints them all as workers in theatre, in the “spectacle vivant.” Once there, these workers were overwhelmingly deemed “suicidal.” (The *intermittents* are “committing collective suicide,” “shooting themselves in the foot,” “burning down their houses,” and other metaphors of auto-destruction .) As a natural accompaniment to suicide, the discourse repeatedly employed a death metaphor: the strikers, we have “murdered festivals” and created “dying theatre companies.” These attitudes could be expressed as ridicule or outrage. Adam Gopnick, writing in the *New Yorker* in September 2003, declares that in France the unemployment benefits awarded *intermittents* are “ridiculously generous,” and have created a situation in which “plumbers and electricians” subsidize “out-of-work actors and actresses.” The reforms proposed in June 2003 to limit the unemployment benefits were the result, according to Gopnick, of finally figuring out that “an excellent remedy for the precariousness of the position of part-time actors already exists: it’s called waiting on tables.” In one of his first responses to the uprisings, Minister of Culture Aigallon (July 10, 2003) declared himself “revolted” by the protestors, who stubbornly continue to refuse to admit that the unemployment reforms are in their best interests.

Instead of recognizing the legitimacy of their right to protest – whether one agrees with the *intermittents* or not – this curious rhetoric of suicide and murder reveals an insidious anti-theatrical prejudice focused on the actor. The *intermittents* are unstable and bent on their own destruction. They are greedy spoiled children, unreasonable, irresponsible, and harmful. In the end, what this represents, Pieiller argues, is the

attempt to “disqualify the possibility that [*intermittents*] are legitimately fighting for their rights.” Instead, it “contains them in stereotypes of blind self-destruction” that are traditionally associated with artistic personalities.

Investigation of the *intermittents de spectacle* is valuable for illuminating the historical double status of the actor as both present and necessary in the cultural imaginary, yet denied agency as a social entity. The actor is a traditionally the palimpsest of modes of cultural performance and a servant to the nation, but ultimately marginalized. If we are trying to understand the complexities of national culture as it figures into the construction and articulation of national identity, it is worthwhile to pay heed to the influence of tenacious, long-standing attitudes about the artists who create it.