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Politics

I’m looking at a photograph taken by Luiz Vasconcelos that was printed in my daily newspaper this morning (‘Eyewitness 11.03.08’, Guardian, 13 March 2008). It is a picture of something that was happening this week on the other side of the world from south London, where I am writing this book. The photograph was taken in a place called Manaus in Brazil. It’s a striking image which shows a line of riot police marching towards us, their black steel-and-wood shields forming an unbroken wall in front of their bodies, so you don’t see their faces, just their armoured kneepads and grey combat trousers and black shiny boots stomping over the dry, brown earth. In front of the advancing police line, her back up against one of the shields, her hand holding onto another, her eyes shut tight, her mouth open to shout or scream, is a woman in a T-shirt and coloured skirt holding against her side an infant who is naked except for a pair of blue plastic
sandals. A wooden truncheon (we see no hand attached to it) comes out from behind a shield in the centre of the picture, suspended above the woman’s head, about to strike or just after impact. The woman is wearing the same sort of sandals as her child. Her feet are braced against the earth.

A caption informs us that the image is of an incident at a dispute near the Amazonian rainforest in northwest Brazil, where police expelled members of the Landless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra) from a privately owned tract of land. ‘In Brazil,’ we are told, ‘where 1.6% of landlords control 46% of the arable land, the Landless Workers Movement encourages people to occupy and farm unused land.’ According to the movement’s website, it is ‘the largest social movement in Latin America with an estimated 1.5 million landless members organized in 23 out [of] 27 states’ (www.mstbrazil.org). Whatever we understand politics to be about, it is likely to have something to do with what is brought to our attention in this picture.

Before looking more closely at the picture, however, we should ask ourselves what we mean by this term ‘politics’. Any search for a definition of politics is going to turn up a range of different understandings, depending for instance on whether the term is taken to refer to the activities of government and other social systems and organisations, or to the study of such activities and systems, or to the processes by which power is distributed – and struggled over – in society more generally. As a starting-point for the present discussion, I offer the following formulation by the writer Stefan Collini. In an article
titled ‘On Variousness; and on Persuasion’ (2004), Collini defines politics as ‘the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space’ (p. 67). By the phrase ‘relations of power’ we might understand that power – or powerlessness – is nothing in itself and only ever meaningful in terms of the distribution of power across social relations, among different groups or classes or interests that make up, however momentarily, a social body. It goes without saying that this distribution of power is often unequal.

Collini’s definition is valuable not only for his focus on questions of power and relations but also for the implication that shaping and determining these questions is not straightforward and is likely to be contested, and that the process of politics is ongoing – indeed, as far as we can see, endless. Although he is not writing about theatre, Collini’s focus on ‘a given space’ is also helpful to us in the context of our discussion of theatre and politics, as so much of what we consider in the pages to come involves our continually pulling focus between one space and another – for example, between the ‘given’ space of the theatrical stage and the imagined space of the outside world, which the stage-play world of the theatre relates to in so many complex ways. It is also probably worth emphasising at the start that this book is intended as an exploration of theatre and politics rather than of ‘political theatre’. I do discuss political theatre in a later section, exploring some twentieth-century theatrical attempts to engage in social relations in ways that would have a direct political effect on the world outside the
theatre and politics

theatre. That discussion is only part, though, of a wider engagement in the following pages with how theatricality can be thought of in relation to politics, neither focusing exclusively on theatre that has been designated ‘political’ nor assuming that all theatre is political in some general way (although it may well be that any piece of theatre can be discussed in terms of its specific political dimensions).

We shall come back to these matters soon. Leaving theatre aside for a moment and returning to our photograph, we could say that the politics involved in this image touches on two related, but in some ways distinct, scenes. One is the scene of bodies and forces that the published photograph makes visible, in which violence and vulnerability, power and exclusion, are matters for those particular people in that particular place; in that moment, politics is a matter of what hurts and what breaks right now, of the immediate struggle of interests and passions in a situation of danger and panic and on-the-spot actions. The other scene involves the larger, public space of the Landless Workers Movement and the contexts in which its struggles take place. These contexts involve mass membership, particular modes of administration and debate and education, literacy programmes, and legal dispute at both a local and a state level over provisions in the Brazilian constitution for the ‘social use’ of unfarmed land. This larger scene, in which politics is a matter of slow, hard work, of patience and organisation, of histories located deep in the past and hopes extended far into the future, is not necessarily separable from that first scene, but it is less easily represented in a picture or photograph.
In both scenes – the one in which a woman is struck by a police truncheon while her child clings to her side and the one of mass movements and local organisation, of legal disputes over constitutional clauses and the right to work the land – ‘politics’ has to do with the same basic concerns. These are concerns about participation, ownership, membership, and exclusion. They involve questions of who – or what – does or does not ‘count’ as a member or owner or worker or citizen. These are questions too of how that count might be contested (the actions that people will take, the things they actually do to change the situation) and also how that contestation is opposed by those in power (in this instance, by deploying the police). Furthermore, as we become aware of the still wider geopolitical context in which these events take place – of issues of international debt and competition over resources, the global movement of capital, goods, and people, and the ways that wealth in one part of the world may be dependent upon poverty in another – ‘we’ may be less than certain that these are questions about scenes being played out far away from us. These concerns are also, in all sorts of ways, likely to be ‘our’ concerns, whoever we may be, and wherever we may happen to find ourselves as we encounter the scene.

There is also, though, a politics to do with our encounter with the scene as such. The fact that we encounter the scene as a photograph itself raises complications, given that this photograph, like any other, is at once detached from the reality it represents (I am looking at a picture of Manaus from five thousand miles away in London) and at the same time
dependent on that absent reality for its significance, and so in a sense still attached to a past moment in a faraway place. Any determination of the relations of power in this given space is going to have to take a certain amount on trust. Such complications are exacerbated, of course, by the fact that you are not even looking at the photograph but reading my description of the image. To which description I add the following: we can observe that whatever the image does show, there is also a great deal that it cannot show. Even if we allow that there are all sorts of ways in which an image can include what is going on outside its frame (for example, through the focus and attention of figures within the image on something out of shot) and can also make reference to what happened before and after the event it records (any sort of clue will do, such as a footprint, a shadow, a bruise, a facial expression), even so the image is partial, in the sense that it shows only part of the story it is telling. The image is also partial in another sense of the word, to do with attachment and bias of judgement: partial, for instance, in the sort of political sympathies it appears to express, on the part of the makers and publishers and likely readers of the image, about the events it depicts. In this respect we could point to the way the image is captioned (could another caption imply a different political viewpoint?) and to the prominence it is given as a double-page colour spread in the middle of a liberal broadsheet newspaper like the Guardian, either of which can colour the politics both of the image itself and of our responses.

There are also, though, ‘facts’ of the image, not the least of which is the fact that the only human-looking beings in
the photograph are that woman and her naked child, backed up against the ‘faceless’ wall of advancing riot police. As fellow humans, presumably we know which side we are supposed to be on, although even that depends upon our assumptions as to what humanity is supposed to look like and our readiness to let any particular example stand in for the species as a whole. That readiness has not always been forthcoming, as we discuss later. There are further complications. In the image the woman is isolated, but a closer look at the photograph reveals that in the hand that is clasped around her child she is holding what looks like a mobile phone. I also notice that at the edge of the image the face of one of the policemen can just be seen peering over his shield. These details begin to complicate the drama of isolation and connectedness that the image stages and the basic oppositions between exposed, fleshly, vulnerable humanity and a seemingly dehumanised, state-sponsored, mechanised violence, around which the politics of the image appears to be structured. Even so, there is a basic situation represented in this image, which we can call a political situation and which involves the paradoxical exclusion of an indigenous woman from the land that she needs to work on to feed herself and her child. As such, it is an image of a type that we became familiar with during the twentieth century, of humans exposed as vulnerable life-forms to the violence of large-scale, technologised, political machines: in the extreme case of the political systems that produced the Holocaust and the Gulags, these were systems of government and social organisation as geared up to the destruction
of actual humans as they were to the production of forms of human community.

Given that the image draws our attention to what I have been referring to as a political ‘scene’, our question now, for an investigation that aims to open a consideration of politics and theatre, is the following: what happens to the politics when it is encountered like this, by us and others, as a sort of dramaturgy? That is to say, not as that woman encounters it, with her back to the advancing shields, her arm around her child, her eyes tight shut, and her mouth open to shout something that we cannot hear. Nor as it is encountered by the photographer Luiz Vasconcelos, who has a particularly privileged relationship to the event as he negotiates accident and chance and contingency for what can be captured and provisionally fixed and sent around the world. But encountered as we encounter it, as the ones who see the image or hear someone else describe it. This is not unlike the ways we encounter things in the theatre (or the ways we come across accounts of the theatre sometimes in theatre studies writing), where the scene does not just happen of its own accord but is put together in a particular way for our benefit, which means also put together to ‘work’ on us in particular ways.

In such instances we may respond to what works on us, with sympathy perhaps or indignation: sympathy for those whose roles in the drama appear to be already written, already distributed; indignation at events that take place before our eyes without our being able to intervene or do anything about them. And maybe all we can do sometimes,
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