Rancière, discussing Aristotle, states: “the sign of the political nature of humans is constituted by their possession of the logos, which is alone able to demonstrate a communicability, the aesthetic of the just and unjust, in contrast to the phôné, appropriate only for expressing feelings of pleasure and displeasure” (p.37).

In some ways Walter Benjamin’s conjunctural category of the ‘affective classes’, a class which would be one that sees no repressive wrong in expressing pleasure and displeasure, is one for which phôné would be valued and not sought to be converted into logos simply in order to be administered by the polis. If it could be said that the working class was formerly in the position of the excluded and seeking access to representation, then, the reframing of its anger and suffering into the language of politics, has to a degree made it a consensual figure. Its visibility by means of representation has made it into a “figure possessing a specific good or universality” upon which a hoped-for practice is based. Is this maybe why Rancière asserts that “politics cannot be defined on the basis of any pre-existing subject” (p.28) for the pre-existing subject, one that “possesses the logos, is already a representation made visible, made perceivable, by the currently operative ‘distribution of the sensible’ and as such cannot affect a new ‘dissensual reconfiguration of the common experience of the sensible’” (p.140)?

This may go some way to guessing at Rancière’s reasons for the abandonment of class struggle politics, but it does not explicitly explain what ‘supplement’, what non-existent subject, could come to ‘take its place and effect what could take on a pro-revolutionary hue: the ‘redistribution of the sensible’.

It feels like Rancière’s notion of ‘distribution of the sensible’ is of equal importance for him as many Marxist notions as the ‘ownership of the means of production’ or the ‘redistribution of wealth’ are to a more straightforward socialist politics. It seems to figure as a radical concept that may have received its charge back when Rancière was writing about the worker-poets of utopian socialism for whom workers’ emancipation was “not about acquiring a knowledge of their condition it was about configuring a time and space that invalidated the old distribution of the sensible” (the other is unqualifiable” (p.136). As workers they were thought of as mere ‘parts’ of the machine they were seeking to refind their species-being as constituted by the wish to make visible, made perceivable, by the currently operative ‘distribution of the sensible’ made visible, made perceivable, by the currently operative ‘distribution of the sensible’ (carried out not solely by a huge media workforce but by underlying dispositifs) is concerned with blocking dissensual interventions by making them imperceivable and hence unconscionable? Erich Fromm certainly thought so when he offered that societies “develop a system, or categories which determine the form of awareness. This system works, as it were, as a socially conditioned filter” (p.198). Is such a ‘partitioning’, then, a fair distribution according to choice or a structural ruse to avoid the ‘common’ of shared affect and the rousing of those who ‘come to partake in what they have no part in’? Aristotle, “a lack of strong affection among the rules is necessary in the interests of obedience and absence of revolt” (p.195) of line of enquiry could extend to cultural critics too. The rush of interpretations of objects and oeuvres has not only a publicity outcome but the ‘cop in your head’ function of prosthetic thought and a reducing of the indeterminacy of chance encounters.

Where then for the politics of dissensus? Rancière, “the essence of politics consists in disturbing this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of those without part identified with the community” (p.36). But who could this supplement be and from what community? Whilst Rancière offers that this supplement could be made up of those “with no qualification to rule, which means at once everybody and anyone at all” (p.53) and whilst this seems less than meretricious, it is still unclear how this ‘non-subject’ would act to ‘redistribute the sensible’ (determine for itself the ‘form of awareness’) or how politics could escape the loop of consensus/dissensus. This is further complicated when Rancière, not picking up again the thread of phôné and hence the ‘domesticating’ sphere, seems to be in accord with a form of civilized consensus where he has it that politics is the “making of statements and not simply noise” (p.152); or, in On the Shores of Politics, where he urges individuals to “tear themselves out of the netherworld of incantatory sounds”. Taken from the point of view of Benjamin’s prospective affective class, is it not here, in what is definitively and historically excluded from politics, that the ‘non-subject’ arises? The rejection of phôné, of the sound of suffering, of noise and its replacement with the functionalism of (theoretic and rhetoric) language, is itself a proviso of permanent consensus and a foreclosure of the strong affect needed “for staging scenes of dissensus”.

In some areas, like music and therapy, noise is a compound of affects, it is that which is not easy to interpret, it is the suffering of phylogenetic agony, it is the breach of the real as constituted by the logos, it is roiling. And as such, as unmediated experience (i.e. non-narrated, non explicated), as raw nerve, it is neither denounceable, nor decidable nor demonstratable. If this unpolluted sound of suffering, this phôné, is difficult to listen to, if it is auto-traumatic, if crucially, it emanates from ‘those without part’, it could well effect a ‘redistribution of the sensible’ beyond that of a logos-led dissensus that Rancière asserts is a part and parcel of democracy. A redistribution that could figure the non-subjects as ‘whatever singularities’ (Giorgio Agamben), as ‘approximate people’ (René Menil), as the affective classes through which noise as unnameable affect requests that we attend to it with a non-prosthetic ‘living attention’. These non-subjects, then, are those for whom phôné can supplant the logos, for whom the convolutions of the diagnosed and the wallings of the infant are communicative. In many ways the domestic and reproductive sphere that has never been allotted a ‘sensible’ and in this light the domestic utopia of Foucault was one attempt at a ‘redistribution of the sensible’. Barthes suggests that “Fouier has chosen domesticities over politics” and that his penchant for neologisms “upsets the laws of language” (p.148). With this there seems to be a choice that lies beyond choosing the ‘just and unjust’, beyond ‘good and evil’, in that through the domestic comes the noise of desire and the inconsistent expression of suffering that demands that we hear it with all its lawless and inarticulate phôné.

These may be grand claims for a polyvalent noise, but it comes to act as a metaphor for the effects of suffering and the self-exclusion from the polls of those that suffer. Where by ‘interval between the “the interval between identities”, that Rancière suggests can found the political subject (p.56), than in those ‘non-subjects’ who in attending to the phôné are seeking to refind their species-being through a traumatic refusal of the partitioning effects of identity and the overdetermined forms of awareness that this entails. The scenes of Rancière’s Proletarian Night’s are said to have “made themselves ‘other’ in a double hopeless rejection, refusing both to live like workers and to talk like the bourgeoisie”. As workers they were denied access to the ‘sensible of poetry’, separated from it in a structure of work and militant politics. Being neither workers nor bourgeois puts them in the in-between of a contemporaneous ‘distribution of the sensible’ (if, in fact, such a distribution allot’s identities in its operation), and their leaving to found utopian communities was maybe, as with Fouier, their attempt to give their ‘redistribution of the sensible’ a public space that was not a polis for political subjects but a ‘domestic utopia’ of approximate people. But what kind of space is this that these worker-poets wanted to create? The practice of poetry, whilst seemingly attributable to the logos, may very well interact too much phôné to be taken as political. It is, then, an Atopic Space? When Barthes, in A Lovers Discourse, writes of atopia he speaks of a refusal to delimit language indecisive”. Is he, perhaps, here hinting at a practice of poetry? When he supplements this with “one cannot speak of the other, about the other... the other is unqualifiable” “this too sets us too much far from the poles for it is there where the logos reigns that just these generalising and other-defining modes of speech do not quantify and speak for the ‘supplement’ and its anonymous suffering.
Rancière’s interest in aesthetics seems to go against what seems to me, in his ‘Ten Theses on Politics’, to be his pro-political aim of injecting distraction and its role in the political into the political’s drive towards democracy. His fight against consensus in this text seems to be about saving politics from ‘annihilation’ (p.44). But, if the required modes of ‘dissertation’, ‘subjectification’ are such that they should ‘reveal a society in its difference to itself’ (p.42) is it not that we have already taken cognisance of this point? The aesthetic discussions that Rancière engages in seems to have much more to start out from in that they allow for and seem to encourage an impact of the aesthetic on the current ‘distribution of the sensible’. Art, he suggests, can determine our understanding, can upset identifier equilibriums, can introduce us into the forbidden and can encourage our intervention in the ‘fields of the real’. Aesthetic practice, then, for me, seems to be charged with revealing the difference in ourselves, to revealing and cultivating a sense of society in ourselves (it could consequently be just as much therapeutic as aesthetic). This troublesome and once pathologisable trait of the unconscious, of the social-psyche. This is the ‘heteregeneous sensible’ of the self as a society, of anxieties and of infra-psychic conflicts, in the ‘heterogeneous sensible’ of the self as a society, that there lies some chance of a redistribution of the sensible. For Fourier this is itself a marker of some kind of suffering. The unconscious desires that could hazard a guess, at play in its ‘determined forms of awareness’ in that, following Freud, it could well be in the realm not only of child-rearing, but also in the atomic space of the therapeutic relationship in which listening is orientated towards phases of singularity rather than carapaced ‘selfs’. Both these spaces are in many ways distant from the polis and political discourse, but maybe it is here in the phônétic ‘confusion of tongues’, in the difficult disclosure of the social-psyche, that there is a ‘metacategorical revol’ to cite Alexander Trocchi. For both in these spaces, as in many improvisatory musical spaces, there rings out another of Rancière’s hopes for critical art as an ‘art that questions its own limits and powers, that refuses to anticipate its own effects’ (p.149). This latter is maybe not something to herald as a monopole of the possibilistic space of the politics of aesthetics, that such a political art may indeed be ‘a society in its difference to itself’ (p.42). But it is, one could hazard a guess, at play anywhere that there is a lack of conditionality and an openness to accept and treat as material the unconscious desires that animates and disables the potentially fluid metabolism of the ‘heterogeneous sensible’ of the social-psyche. This is the material (for better or for worse) through and from which group psychotherapy issues. So just as such a practice or concern could be ascribed to the ‘determined forms of awareness’ in that, following Lacan, perversions could well be seen as ‘the privileged exploration of an existential possibility of human nature’. When leaving aside Fourier’s ideas for a ‘collective prostitution’ as well as the ‘reciprocal polygamy’ of the many risk-universe commons, this sensual belonging can be as straightforward and polymorphously perverse as listening to the other. But it is a listening that is far from passive, it is an empathic and non-critical listening that can, in its offer of ‘living attention’, be sensual rather than instrumental. So, when Rancière writes that ‘art lives as long as it expresses a thought unclear to itself in a matter that resists it’ I feel we are more or less in the realms of an attentiveness to the phôné. The struggle to express is itself a marker of some kind of suffering. The resisting matter could, in some instances, be the logos, the unwieldy institution that often speaks on our behalf or which overwhelms us with its ‘founding’ status. When Rancière goes on to add that ‘art [art] lives inasmuch as it is something else than art’ (p.123), we could well be in the realm not only of child-rearing, but also in the atomic space of the therapeutic relationship in which listening is orientated towards phases of singularity rather than carapaced ‘selfs’. Both these spaces are in many ways distant from the polis and political discourse, but maybe it is here in the phônétic ‘confusion of tongues’, in the difficult disclosure of the social-psyche, that there is a ‘metacategorical revol’ to cite Alexander Trocchi. 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So just as such a practice or concern could be ascribed to the partitioning of art as a separate sphere it could just as likely be de-partitioned to become, like it was always, the propensity of ‘everybody to everyone’ and anyone at all. A private capacity, a facet of species being caught in suffering in order to produce passion, could well be what is meant by ‘class of sensitivity’ or ‘affective class’, for its ‘refusing to anticipate its own effects’, in being beguiled by a candid expression of its own individualistic pithifs, is it not that there is a refusal to reconfigure the same confines for awareness? Does this refusal, based less on protective self-identification than on the mobility of affective states, entail an ‘autotraumatic’ embracing of the ‘wilderness’ of the psyche as a social microcosm? The traumas embedded in the past may not be so much indicators of personalised pathologies as potential insights into the ongoing social constructedness of each ‘self’ as it is pervertedly incarnated in history.

During an interview, pondering Marx’s statement ‘man produces man’, Foucault commented: ‘what must be produced is not man identical to himself... we must produce something that doesn’t yet exist and about which we cannot know…’. Whether or not this ‘existential possibility’ could mean an evolutionary kick-start development beyond our being what Michael Balint has called ‘neotenous embryos’ is maybe not the point. What is maybe at play in refusing to ‘anticipate effects’ is an acknowledgement of both how we may well be ‘neotenous embryos’ and how, ‘leaning-on’ the offered commodity-props, we ward-off the effects of contingency. From repressed memories to social planning, from routines and timetables to keeping our fingers crossed, from the recycling of acclaimed cultural moments to a risk-averse society what we are faced with is, as Adam Phillips writes, “a history that our competence conceals”. This history is one in which Marx and Freud collide: the necessity of an awareness of the past as ‘metamorphic elements’ (p.125), but we could suggest that our own pasts, the history of relationships that have formed us (some haphazard and personal, some determining and structural), are the Grand Narratives from which to embark on a ‘redistribution of the sensible’. That these may resound with phôné is no reason, from the perspective of the polis, to determine an incoherent, animalistic and self-centred. The polis encourages all of these things.

Notes
1 Some notes on Jacques Rancière: Disenchantment, Continuum, 2010. All page references in brackets relate to this book.
8 Roland Barthes: A Lovers Discourse, Noonday 1989, p.35.
10 Barthes, ibid, p.35.
"Man (sic) can… be regarded as an animal which is limited to its species, is limited to the animalistic and self-centred. The polis encourages all of these things.

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