

## Questions of visibility and the politics of the human

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me... That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (Ellison, 2011 [1952], p. 3, emphasis in original)

With these evocative lines Ralph Ellison opens *Invisible Man*, his novel of the life of a nameless protagonist in 1920s and 30s America. A work of fiction, the book nevertheless captures, sometimes in horrifying detail, what it was like to be a Black person at a time when segregation was ‘the law of the land and Jim Crow customs still prevailed’ (Callahan, 2001, p. x); when it was normal for African Americans to walk in the road in order that whites could occupy the pavement; when social intercourse between Black persons and whites was severely regulated; and when, as the brutal murder of fourteen year old Emmett Till demonstrated, speaking to a white woman could have the most tragic of consequences. A time, moreover, when even though they routinely interacted with, spoke to, or required services of Black Americans, (many) white Americans, especially in the South, were unable to perceive them as fully human in a normative social and political sense; when, as Ellison notes, the *humanity* of African Americans was invisible to them. <1>

What interests me here is the relation between invisibility and what Ellison refers to as the construction of the ‘*inner* eyes’ of those with whom his narrator comes in contact, a conception I propose to understand by way of Jacques Rancière’s idea of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (1999). This is the specific way that the perceptible (that is, what is knowable,

thinkable, intelligible, audible, and *visible*), 'reality' in Ellison's sense, is both organised within and organises a given social order. Made manifest in public policy, media practices, law, economic measures, judicial pronouncements, as well as the norms conditioning social interaction, one of the features of this distribution, as Joseph Tanke notes, is that it determines 'who, at the level of subjectivity, can appear in certain times and places' (2011, p. 2). It conditions, in other words, how specific bodies are understood, what capacities they are deemed 'naturally' to have, and what their worth is.

According to this logic, the invisibility of African Americans to which Ellison alludes might be considered to be the effect of a particular *racialised* ordering of what is apprehensible to the senses. One that constitutes them as inferior to the white population; an oligarchic partitioning of the social order that shapes the 'inner eyes' of white Americans, particularly in the racially segregated South, so that African Americans are not thinkable, perceptible, imaginable, or intelligible to them as 'men'. <2> This is a context where, to borrow the words of Frantz Fanon, 'a black is not a man' since the 'black man is a *black man*' (1986 [1952], p. 10, my emphasis). What, we might wonder, would it take in a situation like this to change this racialised perception of reality so that those who are invisible as fully human subjects might become so visible? How might the inner eyes of Southern whites be reconstructed so that they are able to 'see' African Americans differently, as belonging to the same public world as themselves?

In *The Politics of the Human* (2015) Anne Phillips suggests that one of the ways in which subaltern populations have been able to establish their humanity is by insisting on their equality with those who would disavow them. Indeed, she sees the 'assertion of humanness' as being 'simultaneous with the assertion of equality' (Phillips, 2015, p. 79), with 'no space between the moment of asserting one's humanity and the moment of asserting one's equality' (Phillips, 2015, p. 70). For Phillips, humanity and equality are intertwined, if not synonymous. Equality, for her, is not a given. Instead equality is 'something we bring into existence at the moment we claim it'; 'something we assert and to which we commit ourselves' (Phillips, 2015, p. 69). This is why, for Phillips, 'the human is a political matter'

(2015, p. 78). Borrowing from a different lexicon, we might understand both humanity and equality, therefore, as performative, enacting what they proclaim.

The main strength, according to Phillips, of her preferred 'claim-based' account over those she rejects (characteristics-based accounts and abstract notions of what it is to be human) is that it concentrates on 'those still battling to achieve' a 'status as equals' (2015, p. 134), '*those not yet recognised as such*' (2015, p. 9, emphasis in original), namely the displaced, excluded, and marginalised. As such, it focuses attention – rightly, in my view – on the capacity for agency of subaltern populations. It is thus an important counter to theories, including, Phillips suggests, humanitarian, human rights, and global justice approaches, that centre on the powerful and privileged, those already confirmed in their status as equals. This is why she closes *The Politics of the Human* with the following declaration: 'Equality claimed has a greater force and more lasting impact than equality given, and it is here that the real radicalism of the politics of the human lies' (Phillips, 2015, p. 135).

By way of illustration, Phillips offers numerous examples of the kinds of claim-based political activities she has in mind: from saying "'but we women are human too", "we Muslims are human too"' (2015, p. 37) in contexts where that humanity may have been denied, through enactments of equality 'against the odds' as when 'members of the Women's Social and Political Union stand up in a political meeting and unfurl their flag; when Rosa Parks asserts her right to sit where she chooses on the bus; when illegal immigrants risk their anonymity by demonstrating in public for their rights' (2015, p. 77), to occasions when 'if we want to be accepted as full equals we usually have to insist: make a fuss, chain ourselves to railings, perhaps even take up arms' (2015, p. 74). While it is possible that the making of such claims may reshape what I am referring to as the distribution of the sensible, so that those formerly invisible become visible as such, what is unclear from Phillips' argument is precisely how this happens; how, that is, claiming equality might facilitate such a radical change. As I will suggest below, much depends on how equality is understood. In order to

explore this issue I want to return to the concerns with which I began the paper, to do with racial segregation and invisibility.

A common feature of segregated America was the existence of 'whites-only' facilities, from swimming pools and schools, through seats on buses and trains, to restaurants and restrooms. In a well-known episode from the Civil Rights movement, on 1 February 1960 four African American students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College sat down at the all-white restaurant in Greensboro's Woolworths and ordered food. They were refused service. Instead of leaving, they remained seated until the store closed. Over the next five months a number of things happened: the protest at Woolworths was repeated, with increasing numbers of students involved; selected stores in Greensboro were boycotted; sit-ins began at other lunch counters in Greensboro, as well as at other 'five and dimes' in cities across all the Southern states with the sole exception of Mississippi (Andrews and Biggs, 2006, p. 754); and more and more young people were galvanised into action. During the protests, customers and other locals abused the sit-in participants. They threw food and drink at them, harassed them, tried to provoke fights with them, and spat at them. The police arrested several of the student protesters. Eventually, on 25 July 1960 Greensboro's Woolworths lunch counter served its first black customers, four of its own employees. (For further discussion of Greensboro see, e.g. Andrews and Biggs, 2006; Chafe, 1980; Kowal, 2004; Morris, 1981; and Polletta, 1998).<3>

If, following Phillips, we assume that the actions of these students should be understood in terms of equality, then how are we to understand the equality in question? Was it a demand for equal treatment? Did they just want to be treated *like* white Americans were? Was the aim of the protest, to borrow Phillips' own phrase, for African Americans to be 'accepted as full equals' (2015, p. 74) by Southern whites? Or should the sit-ins themselves be seen in a different way: not as a claim *for* equality but as the expression of equality in action (see also May 2010: 72-3)? <4> The answer matters.

Phillips herself recognises an important distinction between equality granted or given by the powerful (a state, the government, a store, perhaps) to formerly unequal groups, and

equality claimed or demanded directly by subaltern populations. There is, I want to suggest, a second distinction that is also pertinent, however: that between thinking of equality as something that can be demanded, asserted ('I am human too'), or created, all characterizations Phillips deploys, and conceiving of equality as a 'point of departure' for action (Ross in Rancière, 1991, p. xix; see also Rancière, 1991, p. 137), an 'assumption' discernible in specific political practices (Rancière, 1999, p. 33; May, 2010, p. 72). How might this latter understanding of equality, not as a goal of politics, a principle inherent in the law, or an effect of a fairer distribution of rights, opportunities, or resources, but as a 'supposition that must be verified continuously' (Rancière cited in Hallward, 2009, p. 141), help us to address the questions of visibility with which this paper is concerned?

In the essay, 'Introducing Disagreement' (2004a), Rancière suggests that: 'In politics, subjects act to create a stage on which problems can be made visible – a scene with subjects and objects, in full view of a "partner" who does not "see" them' <5> Politics thus involves a 'quarrel over the perceptible givens of common life' (Rancière, 2004a, p. 7), a dispute 'about the frame within which we see something as given' (Rancière, 2004b, p. 304) and thus about who or what is perceptible – visible – within that frame. Central to this is that politics involves what Holloway Sparks calls a '(mis)appropriation of equality by those who have no *formal* claim' to it (2016, p. 422). In other words, for Rancière, it involves actions whereby 'a part of those who have no part' (2004b, p. 305) act as *if* they are already equal. How does this logic play out in relation to Greensboro?

Firstly, the sit-ins involved the public staging of a disagreement. As Rebekah Kowal observes: 'On a daily basis it [the lunch counter] was the scene of the enactment of the city's double-dealing social practices; it stood for other places or services to which the protesters lacked access' (2004, pp. 147-8). By demanding to eat at a counter from which they were legally debarred, the students made publically visible the problem of segregation. They exposed the racialised frame that made it *impossible* for their food order to be 'heard' as a simple food order. For to hear it thus would have been to perceive the students as persons who could meaningfully purchase food at this particular counter, when, in fact, this was

precisely what was disallowed – indeed, rendered unthinkable – within the racialised distribution of the sensible underpinning segregation. Their actions in occupying ‘whites-only’ lunch counters thus openly dramatised racial exclusion in North Carolina, and beyond and called into question the ‘normality’ and ‘givenness’ of Jim Crow practices.

Secondly, in staging their dispute the students, aided, in particular, by the press and television news coverage their actions received (Andrews and Biggs, 2006), ‘institut[ed] a quarrel’ (Rancière 2004a, p.: 5) with the very group (the ‘partner’ in Rancière’s terms) unable to “see” them’ as legitimately able to eat where they liked, namely Southern whites. When the students ‘performed their right to be served’ (Kowal, 2004, p. 149), their actions directly refuted the terms of the governing segregationist order, contesting its underlying assumptions of white supremacy and racial hierarchy, the very elements that positioned them as second-class citizens and lesser beings in the first place. They directly confronted – and opposed – the social order that would not, *indeed could not*, acknowledge them as intelligibly human in a social and political sense, the one that rendered them invisible, intervening to reconfigure its sensory basis.

And, thirdly, in so doing their non-violent direct action made ‘public what Jim Crow wanted to hide – Black resistance to segregation’ (SNCC Digital Gateway, n.d.). It rendered African Americans visible, not principally as victims of segregation but as resistive political subjects. The sit-ins proclaimed the students’ ‘demand not only to exist but ... to be *perceived*’ (Panagia, 2010, p. 96, my emphasis). An entrance to the public realm of appearance effected not by explicitly invoking the language of equality, overtly demanding parity with white Americans, or claiming equality but by ‘acting as though they were *already* equal’ (May 2010, p. 72). It is actions of this kind that, for Rancière, make possible the generation of ‘a novel perceptual universe’ (2004a, p. 5), a new distribution of the sensible; in this case, one in which African Americans might become visible, audible, and intelligible *as fully human subjects*. Reframing the sensory community in this way necessarily entails the *re*-construction of (to return to Ellison) the ‘*inner eyes*’ of white Americans so that, henceforth, they might be able to ‘see’ those who were formerly invisible to them.

This is not to say that invisibility will always be a condition that subaltern groups will necessarily want to overcome in all circumstances. Just as Ellison's narrator chooses to embrace his invisibility and live in the shadows of white society, others, undocumented immigrants for instance, might, as Clint Smith suggests, regard it differently: as a 'necessity, a way of insuring one's protection' (2016), at least in the immediate term. When precaritized populations do challenge social and political invisibility, however, they are doing more than just claiming equality for themselves. They are intervening in a sensory universe in order, amongst other things, to shift the perceptions of the unseeing other – those who cannot or will not 'see' them – so that they become perceptible and, thence, intelligible to them as persons that matter. <6> They are engaging, in other words, in a politics of the human centred on contesting the terms of social and political (in)visibility.

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## **Notes**

1. The point is not that African Americans were invisible *per se*; quite the reverse, under segregation they were hyper-visible. It is rather that they were socially and politically invisible as persons who count; that is, as 'human' in any meaningful sense of that term. For the purposes of this paper I am going to read 'man' as a cipher for 'human'.
2. Obviously more needs to be said than I have space for here about the extent to which whites were actively – rather than passively – involved in the construction and perpetuation of racist ideas and to which they willingly, rather than unconsciously, adhered to racist constructions.
3. For an account that explores the Civil Rights sit-ins through the lens of Rancière's work, see May 2010. Where May uses this example to illustrate what Rancière means by

equality, I am more interested in what it reveals about politics, (in)visibility, and the distribution of the sensible.

4. It is important not to conflate the actions of the Greensboro protesters with those of the Civil Rights Movement as a whole, particularly since certain elements within the latter did indeed demand equal recognition (specifically equal rights and freedoms) from the state.
5. There are, of course, issues with Rancière's idiosyncratic conception of politics that require consideration, though I do not have the space to explore them here. See, for instance, Sparks 2016.
6. This of course begs the question, which I cannot pursue at this time, of precisely what it would take to bring about the necessary perceptual shift on the part of the unseeing other.

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