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On Jacques Rancière

Jacques Rancière opposes a type of politics that makes decisions on the people, for the people, instead of the people; a politics that holds that in the political order, all sections of the community have been assigned their proper place. "Politics [...] is that activity which turns on equality as its principle", and begins when inequality is challenged. But if the political subject is a subject of a wrong, and politics exists only through the subjectivization of that wrong, how can we avoid a victimological identification of the political subject?

1

In order to situate Jacques Rancière's thought, which moves within the intersections of philosophy, politics and aesthetics, let us rely on his own words.¹ In an interview with Davide Panagia, Rancière describes his break from the work within the circle around Louis Althusser (Rancière was one of the co-authors of the famous *Lire le Capital* in 1965) in terms of a shift away from a hermeneutic reading of texts towards a more affirmative view of language. Especially since the events of 1968, Rancière moved away from a critique based on the Sausseurian distinction between *la langue* and *la parole*, a distinction between the underlying (unconscious) structures and the cultural, social, political and other texts that are determined by those structures. He has distanced himself from this kind of reading based on suspicion towards an approach that is more affirmative of the surface itself. The surface no longer hides, but becomes a scene on which the creativity and effectiveness of language games and speech acts are demonstrated. Speech acts are thus no longer understood as ideological artefacts or the superstructural effects of some "absent cause", but precisely as acts, as political gestures in themselves, capable of reconfiguring the situation in which they are enunciated.

Rancière based this poetical account of language and speech (poetical in the sense of creation, formation, making happen) on a rereading of Plato's critique of writing (in *Phaedro*). The written word — the "orphan word" Plato calls it — is always a supplementary element in relation to the communal order. It can liberate itself from a situation in which the roles of the proper addresser and the addressee, as well as the limits of what is sayable, are strictly determined. The written word can be appropriated by anyone. Unlike the individual utterance of the spoken word which is tied to "the logic of the proper", the written word, unexpected and inexhaustible, presents a certain "wandering excess" in relation to the world of carefully distributed roles, tasks and the speech that is understood as properly belonging to the individuals and groups that are seen as performing these roles and tasks within the communal order. This excess of words over the existing distribution of the common that establishes the communal order represents the egalitarian power of language

— which Rancière calls *literarity* — the ability to disturb the existing circuits of words, meanings and places of enunciation. "Humans are political animals," Rancière says, "for two reasons: first, because we have the power to put into circulation more words, "useless" and unnecessary words, words that exceed the function of rigid designation; secondly, because this fundamental ability to proliferate words is unceasingly contested by those who claim to 'speak correctly'."²

2

We can already note that, in Rancière's work, there is a connection between equality, the excessive/supplementary element (in this case the "useless' and unnecessary words", the literariness of language), and the existence of politics. If we first turn to equality, we find at the beginning of Rancière's great book, *Disagreement*, the following statement: "politics [...] is that activity which turns on equality as its principle."³ In order to get a clearer picture of what this seemingly simple statement means, what kind of understanding of politics it sets into place, we must ask ourselves at least two related questions: What kind of equality is Rancière talking about? What is the relationship between politics and equality as the principle of politics?

Equality, which is axiomatically affirmed by Rancière, is the equality of people qua speaking beings. It is an *an-archic* equality in the sense that it exists through the inability of any political order to count the communal parts and to distribute the shares of the common between them under the harmonious geometrical governance of some *arkhe* (the principle of Justice, of the Good) without there being a fundamental wrong [*le tort*] done; a miscount, which is then where the politics begins. It is the "equality of everyone with anyone" which, irreducible to any political order and therefore never instituted as such, has its existence only in the existence of a wrong and through the processing of this wrong, which constitutes politics. It is an equality which presents itself only through a declaration of a wrong committed by the count of community parts — it is thus, an equality which exists through what denies it. However, every declaration of a wrong is possible only if the equality of people is axiomatically assumed.

The existence of a fundamental wrong, a miscount in the count of community parts, is what is scandalous for political philosophy, critiqued heavily by Rancière, whose project since Plato has been to find the proper principle, the *arkhe*, of politics and thereby deny the existence of this wrong. The existence of a wrong "presents philosophy with the effect of another kind of equality, one that suspends simple arithmetic without setting up any kind of geometry. This equality is simply the equality of anyone with anyone else: in other words, in the final analysis, the absence of *arkhe*, the sheer contingency of any social order."⁴ It is this contingency that the existence of politics makes manifest, says Rancière, and that political philosophy has always sought to domesticate and placate by suturing politics to a certain (extra-political) principle. This takes three forms: archi-politics (Plato; the attempt to tie politics to a communitarian rule, i.e. to subsume politics under the logic of a strict and closed distribution of parts, a social space which is homogeneously structured and thus leaves no space for politics to emerge); para-politics (Aristotle; the attempt to reduce political antagonism to mere competition, negotiation, exercise of an agonistic procedure, i.e. to draw "the part of those who have no part," which is the subject of politics, into the police order as just one of the many parts); and meta-politics (Marx; the understanding of political antagonism as a displaced manifestation of "true" antagonism, which is

socio-economic, i.e. politics that can only happen with the promise of its self-abolishment, the destruction of the political theatre that is necessary for the direct administration of the socio-economic sphere).⁵

Based on this, we can be more precise regarding Rancière's axiom of equality (perhaps going beyond the authorization of his text). We could say that the fact that the axiom of equality introduces a paradoxical "principle of a lack of any proper principle" of political life, the lack of the *arkhe* of politics, should not lead us to think that this "principle of a lack of any proper principle of politics" designates a *simple* absence of any principle whatsoever. While there is a lack of the *arkhe* of politics, this very lack itself is never lacking. The equation of the axiom/principle of equality with a simple absence of any principle whatsoever actually runs the danger of positing this absence itself as a principle and inaugurating, for example, chaos as the only existing principle of politics — introducing thereby, through the back door, the very logic it is trying to surpass. Against this equation of the axiom of equality with chaos as the only proper principle, we should carefully claim — distinguishing thereby chaos from an-archy — that the axiom of equality does not mean a simple absence of any principle, but stands for the principle which exists, or, perhaps, better, *the principle which insists precisely as lacking*.

3

There are consequences to be drawn from all this: equality posed in this way can only be an empty equality, an equality that does not determine a specific social relation in advance. There is no proper model of equality to serve as the ground or the goal of politics — as we have seen, equality is the "principle" which inscribes into the social field the very lack of a proper principle of politics — and because of that it never simply pre-exists politics but must be, in order to have an effect, presupposed and verified by it. Here, we touch upon our second, more complicated question — that of the relationship between politics and equality.

Rancière identifies politics, which in his work is synonymous with democracy, with the appearance of the people — the *demos*. The *demos* is the political subject with the appearance of which the existing political order (in Rancière's words, *the order of the police*) is distanced from itself, split into a contentious community. Rancière offers a figure of the people which is opposed to what seem today to be the two dominant modes in which the people appear; and that are both essentially forms of the appearance of the people as absent, as non-appearing: on the one hand, the people identified with *the population* (ranging from the populations measured and decided on by the surveys of the statist or managerial discourses of various experts all the way to the populations identified with either side within the Manichean scheme of the struggle between the Good and the Evil), and on the other, the people identified with the role of *victims* (constituted by the fascinated humanitarian gaze). Today politics is subsumed either under some idea of proper governance (capitalist liberal democracy), religion ("the clash of civilizations"), or morality (the nebulous humanitarian care for the distant other). It is mostly performed as deciding over the destiny of the people removed from the domain of the people themselves; making decisions on the people, for the people, instead of the people. Rancière opposes against this an understanding of politics where politics is nothing but the appearance of the people, the construction of a scene on which the people occur as a political subjectivity.

To approach Rancière's concept of politics we should first note that it cannot be understood without its opposite: the order of the police, or, *the police*. The police signify for Rancière what is commonly, in the journalistic parlance of our times, understood by the term politics. "Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems of legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it *the police*." The logic of the police is therefore to distribute and legitimate. It is the logic of saturation. It is essentially the process which claims that in the given political order all of the community parts have been (ac)counted (for) and that each has been assigned its proper place. In order to determine the parties and to define their share in the common, the police has to be first of all a law regulating the way in which these parts appear, the logic that decides how and what part is visible and identifiable as a part, whether or not its speech will be heard as intelligible, etc. In other words, the police is, first of all the delimitation of the field of the possible experience,⁶ the partition of the perceptible, the distribution of the sensible (*le partage du sensible*), as Rancière calls it.⁷

4

Rancière thinks *politics* in the form of an encounter. Politics opposes to the police logic of saturation the logic of the void and the supplementary. While, on the one hand, the police screams how there are only the existing parts of the society and how each of them has been given its due share of the common, politics, on the other hand, claims the opposite, namely, that there is a wrong done in the existing count of the community parts, that *there is "a part of those who have no part"*. It does so, first, through the assumption of the existence of a wrong and, thus, through an axiomatic assumption of equality, and secondly, by constructing a scene in which the existence of a wrong is verified and *subjectivized*, i.e. through giving name to "the part of those who have no part" (the people, the proletariat), the political subjectivity which is the subject of a wrong. To be precise, it is not that equality as such is necessarily political — for Rancière there are many kinds of equality. It is rather that, for politics to exist, it must assume the existence of equality and organize within the order of the police a scene of an encounter between the logic of this order and the "borrowed" logic of equality.

Politics, which is nothing but the declaration of a wrong, is always an encounter between two heterogeneous worlds: the world of the police and the "improper" world of equality. Or, as Rancière says in a somewhat longer quote: "political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being. *Politics occurs where there is a place and a way for two heterogeneous processes to meet. The first is the police process in the sense we have tried to define. The second is the process of equality.*" (My italics — L.A.)

We can see now how Rancière avoids identifying political subjectivity with a particular social group or a population, already identifiable within the police order. Politics is the appearance of the singular universal: the property-less part that is supplementary to the existing ac/count of the parts of community and, thereby, from the perspective of the order of the police non-existent. The order of the police consists precisely in the denial of the existence of any such

part, in rendering the wrong invisible and therefore non-existent. Since the order of the police, the logic of the management of populations, is precisely the denial of its existence, it is necessary that giving consistency to the part of those who have no part, the property-less part, which is the political subject, involves artifice and that the metaphor of political subjectivization for Rancière is that of a theatre, the logic of a staging, of constructing a scene, which is necessarily anti-statist. Politics could be understood as the encounter between the logic of the state and the logic of the stage. The supplementary part, which has to be staged because it is not any of the particular social groups already identifiable within the police order (it is not one of the statistic categories of the population), appears as the exception that stands for the whole and has the effect of disrupting the existing set of identifications, separating the community parts from the places they occupy, and creating a political community of dissent. That is why, for Rancière, political subjectivization is always also a process of disidentification — a disidentification of parts of society from themselves and from the places they occupy.

Let us take the example of *the proletariat*, the classical name for the part of those who have no part and therefore stand for the whole of the (capitalist) society. It is not, Rancière claims, that this word, when it appeared in the struggles of the nineteenth century, expressed a really existing working class culture; it is not that it functioned as a *representation* of a social class, or that it identified the part of the existing population. It rather functioned as a "useless" word, unrecognizable as a valid category from the standpoint of the legal speak of the police order, therefore an artifice, which enabled the declaration of a wrong, the naming of the part of those who have no part and giving the minimal consistency of being to this political subjectivity: "the simple counting of the uncounted, the difference between an inegalitarian distribution of social bodies and the equality of speaking beings." To follow Rancière, the scene of politics is not constituted by an antagonistic encounter between the parts of a population: the working class and the owners, for example. It rather consists in a deployment of the axiom of equality through the artifice of political subjectivity — in this case the specific use of the name of the proletariat. The proletariat names the process in which the working class assumes a distance from itself, where it not only stands for the particular social group, the population of those exploited by the capitalist society, the statistical category of "the worker", but for the capitalist society as such, for the whole of the situation, the absolute equality of everyone with anyone.

5

The subject of politics measures precisely the distance of any social group from itself. It is the measure of a relationship between a particular social group identifiable within the order of the police (woman as a social category with the expected set of tasks to perform and roles to assume) and the ability of its name to be appropriated by anyone, the ability of its name becoming the inscription of a wrong (women as the subject of political struggle, as the name with which the declaration of a wrong takes place). Politics relies on this distance between the part of the population and the place it occupies; it lives off the difference between the name as a rigid designation of a social entity and a name as an empty word that can stand for the equality of everyone. Consequently, there also can be no privileged political class. And Rancière goes further: not only is there no part of the population that would be inherently political, there is no other object that would be inherently political; politics does not have an object of its own. There is no properly political content. Politics occurs within the order of the police. It shares its objects, its

content with and happens against the background of the order of the police. Politics is thus a matter of form. Anything can become political (the strike, the demonstration, the workplace) — if it breaks with the logic of negotiation between the existing social entities, stops being the site of the determination of the proper, and becomes a scene of an encounter between the logic of the police and the axiomatic assumption of equality, a subjectivization of a wrong and the disidentification of the communal parts from themselves.

It is clear why, for Rancière, the political subject cannot be identified with the population, or a particular part of a population. The population is always an established sum of parts and it is only possible to conceive of a political subjectivity as a subject of a wrong, the subject of a miscount in the count of the parts of the population, if this subject is not one of the parts. That is why the subjectivization of a wrong can only happen through the addition of a supplementary ("useless", empty) part, the part of those who have no part, to the existing count of the parts of the population. But we have also said that for Rancière the subject of politics is also not a victim. Here certain problems emerge.

If the political subject is a subject of a wrong, if politics exists only through the subjectivization of the wrong, how can we avoid a victimological identification of the political subject with this wrong? If the political subjectivity can exist only insofar as the wrong exists, how can we avoid understanding the wrong as the cause of the subject and, consequently, turning the political subject into a victim? Indeed it would be hard to avoid the victimization of political subjectivity, if we assumed that the wrong simply precedes and determines the existence of the political subject. It would in fact mean the equivalent of finding the *arkhe* of politics (in this specific case political philosophy would have to establish a victimological *arkhe*), which, as we have seen, is prohibited by Rancière's conceptualization of the "principle" of equality. But, as also the Slovenian philosopher and translator of Rancière's work, Jelica Sumic–Riha, has noted,⁸ things are more complicated. For if politics, which begins with a declaration of a wrong, only happens within the order of the police and if the order of the police is, by definition, the order of the non–existence of a wrong, then the wrong can not simply precede its declaration. The wrong does not simply precede the appearance of the political subject, the subject of a wrong. It follows that with the declaration of the wrong within the order of the police it is not only the political subject that appears, but the wrong itself. The declaration of the wrong is therefore never simply a statement of an already existing fact. Politics is not countering facts with other facts. The existence of a wrong is not a fact. The declaration of a wrong consists rather in the break with the logic of the factual. The declaration of a wrong is strictly impossible, since the existence of the wrong does not precede its declaration. It is nevertheless a declaration that happens. It happens through an enunciation that retroactively changes the conditions of its own possibility. The positing of a political subjectivity through the declaration of a wrong thus involves a kind of an anarchic, free gesture that authorizes itself through a retroactive presupposition of the existence of the conditions of its own possibility. That is why, as Rancière tells us, politics is always in the first place a disagreement about the existence of politics.

¹ The reader, interested in a sympathetic yet critical account of Rancière along with other famous dissenting disciples of Louis Althusser (Etienne Balibar and Alain Badiou) and in the context of contemporary political debates (including the work of Ernesto Laclau), might find it worthwhile to read the second chapter ("The Split Universality") of Slavoj Žižek's book, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London and New

York: Verso 1999, 125–244.

- 2 Davide Panagia, "Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière", *Diacritics* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2000), 115.
- 3 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), ix.
- 4 Ibid. 15.
- 5 See chapter 4 of *Disagreement*, entitled "From Archipolitics to Metapolitics".
- 6 This is also why the police must be differentiated from the classical concept of the "ideological state apparatuses". Rancière draws the distinction in the following way: "I do not, however, identify the police with what is termed the 'state apparatus'. The notion of a state apparatus is in fact bound up with the presupposition of an opposition between State and society in which the state is portrayed as a machine, a 'cold monster' imposing its rigid order on the life of the society. This representation already presupposes a certain 'political philosophy', that is, a certain confusion of politics and the police. The distribution of places and roles that defines a police regime stems as much from the assumed spontaneity of the social relations as from the rigidity of state functions." (Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 29).
- 7 It is in this sense that the role of aesthetics is crucial for politics. It is one of the greatest achievements of Rancière's to redirect the commonly accepted "Benjaminian" doxa of the inherently fascist character of aesthetization of politics towards an understanding of another, crucial aesthetic dimension of politics (and the political dimension of aesthetics), which, unlike the aesthetization of politics as a unification of the antagonistic social body into an organic whole, is understood precisely as the dimension of the split of the social body from itself, the disruption of the existing distribution of social parts and places, and the reorganization of the sensible world on which it rests.
- 8 I am relying here on Sumic–Riha's text "The Subject of a Wrong", published in the Slovenian Journal of Philosophy. Jelica Sumic–Riha, "Subjekt Krivice", *Filozofski vestnik*, 3 (1997).

Published 2007–03–01

Original in English

Contribution by Fronesis

First published in *Fronesis* 19–20 (2005) (Swedish version)

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