

Democracy means equality

Passages: Jacques Rancière, for more than twenty years you have been following a somewhat unusual philosophical itinerary. It is obvious that what you are doing has nothing in common with traditional academic work. Most of your books reveal philosophical thought in unexpected contexts or in contexts that have been reformulated in atypical fashion.

Rancière: Given the historical and political conjuncture of the 1970s, which I certainly did not foresee, I wanted to look again at certain of the concepts and conceptual logics that Marxism used to describe the functions of the social and the political. For me, that wish took the form of a decision, which might be described as purely empirical, to look at the contradiction between the social and the political within the working-class tradition. Basically, I wanted to know how Marxism related to that tradition. I wanted both to establish what that working-class tradition was, and to study how Marxism interpreted and distorted it. For many years I took no more interest in philosophy. More specifically, I turned my back on what might be called political theories, and read nothing but archive material. I posited the existence of a specifically working-class discourse. I began to suspect that there was once a socialism born of a specifically working-class culture or ethos. Years of work on working-class archives taught me that, to be schematic about it, 'working-class proletarian' is primarily a name or a set of names rather than a form of experience, and that those names do not express an awareness of a condition. Their primary function is to construct something, namely a relationship of alterity.

That, then, was the starting point. I then slowly went back to asking questions about a certain number of concepts from within the philosophical tradition. The essential matrix for what I have been doing since then was supplied by the writings of a carpenter called Gauny. They take the form of an experiment in what might be described as 'wild philosophy'. The most significant of his writings deal with his relationship with time and speech. What did this mean? I had been working on these texts, and when I looked again at certain texts from within the philosophical tradition, and especially Plato's *Republic*, I realized that this self-taught nineteenth-century carpenter had given philosophy the same conceptual heart as Plato, namely the fact that the worker is not primarily a social function, but a certain relationship with the *logos*, and that he is assigned to certain temporal categories.

Jacques Rancière first came to prominence as one of the co-authors, with Louis Althusser, of the original two-volume edition of Lire le Capital (1965), to which he contributed an essay on Marx's 1844 Manuscripts (trans. 'The Concept of "Critique" and the Critique of "Political Economy"', in Ali Rattansi, ed., Ideology, Method and Marx, Routledge, 1989). However, he soon broke with Althusser (see Rancière, La Leçon d'Althusser, 1974), becoming an influential figure in French Maoism. This break, at once political and theoretical, was focused on what Rancière has described as 'the historical and philosophical relations between knowledge and the masses'. Developing out of a critique of Althusser's theory of ideology (see Rancière, 'On the Theory of Ideology – Althusser's Politics', RP 7, Spring 1974; reprinted in R. Edgley and R. Osborne, eds, Radical Philosophy Reader, Verso, 1985), it led to a series of reflections on the social and historical constitution of knowledges: La Nuit des prolétaires, 1981 (trans. Nights of Labour, Temple University Press, 1989); Le Philosophe et ses pauvres, 1983; and Le Maître ignorant, 1987 (trans. The Ignorant Schoolmaster, Stanford University Press, 1991). More recently, since 1989 Rancière has broadened his canvas to engage the constitution of 'the political' within the Western tradition (Aux bords du politique, 1990; trans. On the Shores of Politics, Verso, 1994) and the poetics of historical knowledge (Les Noms de l'histoire, 1992; trans. The Names of History, Minnesota University Press, 1994). His latest books are Le Mécontentement, 1995 and Mallarmé – la politique de la sirène, 1996.

At this point, I stumbled across the famous passage in Book II of *The Republic* where Plato speaks of the workers who have no time to do anything but work, and the passage in Book VI where he criticizes the ‘little bald tinker’ and those with ‘disfigured bodies’ and ‘battered and mutilated souls’ who ‘betake themselves to philosophy’.* I recognized that the structure was the same. It was a largely empirical structure relating to the temporality of the worker’s activity. And there was a close correspondence between that structure and the fully elaborated symbolic structure that denied the worker access to the universal *logos* and, therefore, to the political. That is what I was trying to conceptualize in *Le Philosophe et ses pauvres*, but it also provided the main guidelines for my later research into how the ascription of any relationship with language is also the ascription of a type of being.

The importance of the Greeks

Passages: One might say that your subsequent books have almost systematically emphasized the importance of the Greeks. Are the Greeks, and especially Plato and Aristotle, of particular relevance to you?

Rancière: Yes. I refer to Plato and Aristotle because they are in fact the most modern theorists of the political. In terms of the political, they are the basic thinkers, and they are therefore the most modern thinkers. The circulation of the signifiers of politics is, so to speak, a precondition for politics. Signifiers that are essentially Greek and Roman circulate through the medieval Church and the Renaissance, and are then taken up again during the revolutionary period. Some signifiers of politics, such as the concept of leisure, play an absolutely central role in the nineteenth century, and they derive directly from ancient philosophy. I wanted to stress that line of descent. It so happens that the only philosophical texts to address directly the subject-matter of my nineteenth-century texts were by Plato and Aristotle. In comparison, the writings of Kant or Hegel are, in this context, no more than a pale imitation, even though Hegel does in fact rework the idea of the world and of need. Hegel is a modern political economist. In that sense, he comes close to the world that produced my working-class texts. At the same time, I would say that what Hegel has to say about it takes us back to a symbolic structure that was inscribed or written by Plato and Aristotle, and that was perpetuated by what might be termed a vulgarized Ciceronianism. And in that sense it may prove to be one of the basic structures of any theory of the political.

Passages: So is there a line of descent, a continuity, to the question of the political?

Rancière: We have to think in terms of disparities because if we think in terms of a continuity we inevitably trivialize the object we are thinking about. We explain the familiar in terms of the familiar and, ultimately, we fail to establish any difference between the familiar and the totally unfamiliar. There was, for instance, a time when we explained every strike or every working-class text in terms of the overall relations of the world imperialist system. Then there is the sociological tautology that states that a fact can be explained in terms of its conditions of existence. That may well be perfectly true, but it is not very interesting. If we wish to grasp the singularity of an experience, we have to create disparities. In the present case, when I refer to Plato and Aristotle, I am creating the greatest possible disparity. On the other hand, there obviously is an element of continuity, a very slender thread running through the great expanses of silence. That is what I was trying to analyse when I looked, for example, at the fate of a word like *proletarius*. When I read *Attic Nights* by Aulu-Gelle I was obviously struck by the fact that, by the second century of our era, no one knew what the word meant any more. So they turn to scholarly authorities to find out what such a word might mean. And it so happens that the scholarly answer corresponds precisely to what the word means within the lived historical experience of the proletarians of the nineteenth century.

*Plato, *The Republic*, trans. A.D. Lindsay, Everyman, London, 1992, II 371; VI 495.

‘Proletarian’ does not mean ‘industrial worker’; it means ‘someone who is of no importance in the *polis*’ because all he has to contribute is his productive and reproductive power. Basically, the disparity introduced by looking at the classics allows us to glimpse a very different line of descent. Take *La Méésentente*. What I was really trying to do was to react against a certain modern tendency to think democracy, socialism and Marxism in terms of a dominant problematic. I am referring to the so-called theologico-political problematic, which explains everything in terms of Christianity, the king’s two bodies and the catastrophic decorporealization of the royal body. My aim was to get away from this standard discourse, which explains the political figures of democracy and totalitarianism by referring to the panic caused by the decorporealization of the king’s two bodies, and the revolutionary attempt to re-create that body. I wanted to distance myself from that kind of historical argument, and to say that it is possible to think the categories of democracy, socialism and our political state by bracketing out that sequence. It is not a basic explanatory sequence; it simply became the dominant sequence at a given moment, and there were obvious circumstantial reasons why that should have been the case.

Passages: *La Méésentente* centres on a concept of the people, the *demos*, defined as an absence within a certain statistical notion of the people. What does that mean?

Rancière: One of the starting points for the book was an article I was asked to write five years ago for an issue of *Le Genre humain* devoted to the question of consensus. It appeared to me that the idea of a consensus was an attempt to find a direct correspondence between the notion of ‘the people’ and that of ‘the population’, defined as an object that can be completely broken down into given empirical categories. And it seemed to me that the poverty of the political, or the collapse of the political that we are now witnessing, could be understood in terms of this identification of the people with a political category, and of the population with a sociological category that could be described by using the appropriate statistical tools. Going back to the great concepts of the people – disparate concepts of labourers, proletarians, citizens, and the people – I therefore began to explore the idea that any political subject is the mark of a disparity and not an identity. That is why I began to re-examine the concept of the *demos* in classical thought. In a sense, *La Méésentente* is no more than an extended commentary on the opening lines of Aristotle’s *Athenian Constitution*. Aristotle explains the situation of the poor by saying that they had no share in the *polis*. In a sense, one can say that politics begins when those who have no share begin to have one.

Thinking about consensus in this way led me to realize that the *demos* was, right from the start, a very singular object. *Demos* became a name for ‘the community’, but for any well-born Athenian it meant something very specific, namely the poor, those who are nothing. My starting point, then, was the paradoxical object I analysed as the first object of politics. Politics begins with the existence of a paradoxical object that is at once a part and a whole. Which implies the existence of a still more paradoxical object because the part that is counted as a whole basically consists of those who have no share in anything. This is also important in terms of contemporary problematics, where what we call ‘exclusion’ refers to the one element that cannot be counted in a state system where everyone can supposedly be counted; where it is supposedly possible to quantify every element in the *polis*, their needs and their opinions. There is a remainder that has not been counted and cannot be counted. It seems to me that politics begins when the uncounted are not only counted, but when counting the uncounted comes to be seen as the very principle, the very element, of politics. I therefore tried to develop this logic.

It might obviously be argued that I am drawing a hasty comparison between the Greek *demos* and the modern proletariat. But I think it is vital to argue that politics exists only when there are subjects who are marked as different and that, in the final analysis, the difference that creates a political subject always comes down to counting the uncounted, with all the paradoxes that may entail. In other words, the subject is always a problematic subject, either

because it appears to have been double-counted, as was the case with the Greek *demos*, or because it seems not to have been counted at all, as is the case with the modern proletariat. This statistical excess or deficit relates to the non-consensual nature of politics. Politics does not revolve around partners who represent actual groups. It centres on the statistical notion of a subject that is in excess of all social statistics. And politics therefore involves a process that subjectivates those who take the floor in order to say something, who step forward to state their names.

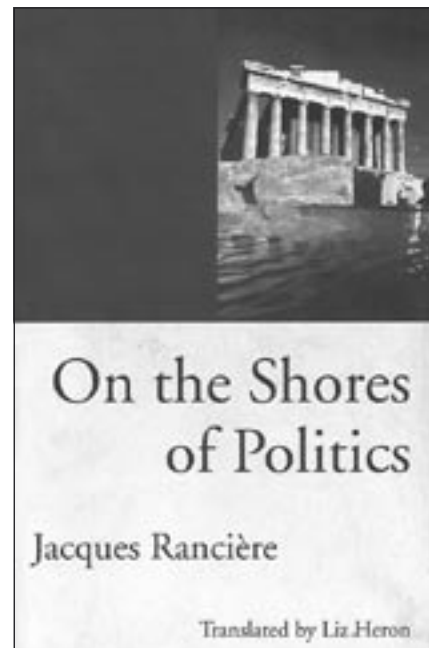
Subjectivation and memory

Passages: Then there are the homeless, the unemployed and those with no fixed abode. Why is it that they cannot institute what the proletariat instituted? Why don't they have the same subjectivating function?

Rancière: I think that the homeless are simply marked by their deprivation. The difficulty is that the possibility of a subjectivation of the uncounted implies that a wrong can be universalized in some form. But someone with no fixed abode cannot universalize the wrong that has been done them. A concept such as that of the proletariat is a concept that relates to a symbolic count of community. In contrast, someone with no fixed abode is simply a reminder of the fact that there are in the community and its distribution people who lack something. That lack is both something that can be made good and something that cannot be made good. And that implies that it cannot be subjectivated as the subject of a universal wrong. The proletariat has been universalized, sometimes on the basis of a misunderstanding, as was the case in the first decade of the century, when it seemed that being productive necessarily meant being on the side of all the oppressed and being anti-militarist. In historical terms, that misunderstanding proved painful, but it was simply the reverse side of the proletariat subject's ability to universalize a wrong by representing a part of society that was not part of society. 'Proletarian' was a name meaning 'uncounted', but it allowed other forms of exclusion to be counted, whereas 'no fixed abode' is not a name but merely a description of a state. It therefore oscillates between being the anthropological figure of exclusion and the juridical figure of someone with particular rights that can be quantified along with other rights. We are now seeing an attempt to replace the statistical subjectivation of the uncounted with a grand census of particular rights and of the particular groups which enjoy those rights.

Passages: Aren't people without any fixed abode and the proletariat, in fact, completely new categories that cannot cling on to a complete history, to a whole memory that once had a political impact?

Rancière: Yes. The concept of memory is an ambivalent one. There have been periods when it was thought that memory was a property of social bodies. There was the great period of people's memory or working-class memory. There have also been periods when it was thought that memory was something that could be injected, and that people therefore had to have a history if they were to be aware of their identity, their past and where they were coming from. I believe that memory does not function like that. Just as there are singular forms of subjectivation, there are, I think, singular operators of memorization. To take our generation, all those who explain '68 in sociological terms are, in my view, quite mistaken. '68 was not a youth revolt. '68 did not represent the emergence of a new way of life. '68 was an event inscribed within a certain type of political memory, and that memory was bound up with decolonization. The 'German Jew' of '68 would have been unthinkable were it not for a certain mode of including the Other. And that mode of inclusion was inscribed within the



after-effects of mobilization against the Algerian war. It was bound up with the way in which the figure of the colonized and their war of liberation replaced the figure of the proletarian as the form that allowed a wrong to be universalized and as a way of espousing the cause of the Other. The Third Worldist ideology of the 1960s projected the negative universal power of the proletariat on to the rebellion of the colonized. The movements of '68 recentred that power on the figure of the proletarian, and that has given rise to other misunderstandings.

Passages: If we accept the idea that the political is grounded in irreducible conflicts that can flare up in different ways, what are the contemporary indicators of those permanent conflicts, given all the talk of the disappearance of the right-left dichotomy? Where will the future conflicts occur? In what domain, on what terrain?

Rancière: I am trying to look at the notions that make politics possible. How politics becomes concretely possible is another matter. In the absence of subjects capable of realizing equality – which is the ultimate and absent foundation of politics – in the form of an active freedom, the question of equality is laid bare. Fragmentary political scenes are taking shape around the issue of whether society should be structured around an egalitarian or a non-egalitarian rule.

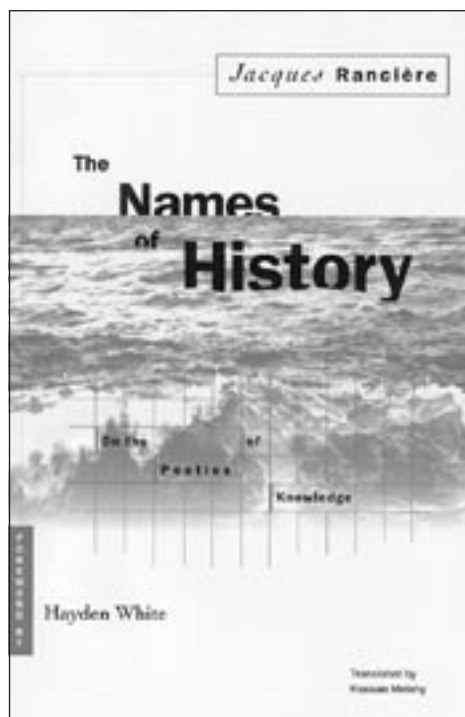
In France, until the strikes of Autumn 1995, politics usually centred around the youth issue, around the school and university question. The educational system is in fact becoming the site designated by our social system as its most important link, as the site of society's fantasmatic self-identity. Schools and universities are supposed to be able to supply something the world of labour can no longer supply: the focus which, thanks to 'training', allows the distribution of skills to be brought into line with the distribution of jobs. They therefore supposedly allow society to be equal to itself, to be a body in which every function has its place. More so than ever before, they are a metaphor for society itself, the site where its egalitarian or non-egalitarian meaning can be stated, and where the logic of consensus must break down. We have therefore reached the point where those who govern us are obliged to *declare*

inequality. At the same time, the egalitarian signifier can be grasped (thanks to the issue of secular education 'for young people'). And the political does exist to some extent when the political signifier can be grasped as such.

During the strikes of Autumn 1995, the place where the egalitarian signifier was manifested reverted to the 'worker' pole, thanks to the issue of the public sector, of pension and other rights and even the issue of how 'intelligence' is shared out within the social body. The egalitarian signifier could be grasped once more. But the problem is that it was the only thing that was grasped. The egalitarian signifier was not refracted through any freedom or citizenship. The question is whether or not these mixed situations allow us to imagine a politics in which a declaration of equality or non-equality can polarize everything. I have no answer to that question.

Passages: If we accept that philosophy has, ever since Plato and the ancients, taken a fairly elitist stance, isn't there a potential conflict between democracy and philosophy? What is the role of the intellectual who wants to take the side of democracy and equality?

Rancière: What, precisely, is an intellectual? The word has, I think, two meanings. First of all, it means someone who thinks for himself or herself, and that does not provide a definition of any particular social group. When the word does refer to a specific social category, that category is always bound up with a political lack or with the limitations of politics. More specifically, today's intellectual



is someone who speaks in a political void, someone who speaks up because political forces cannot make themselves heard. The intellectual then takes on a number of functions at the same time. The intellectual tells the statesman what state society is in, and what social trends he has to deal with. When there is no political subjectivation, the intellectual is the incarnation of great principles. Personally, I do not feel that my role is that of an intellectual. Any role that I might be able to play relates to my work as a researcher, a teacher and a writer, defined in the broad sense: a writer is someone who does not write because he or she has specific qualifications. That is where the question of equality comes into play, but not the question of whether one speaks for the elite or for the general public. For a writer, equality means speaking both for everyone and for no one in particular.

In my own view, my role is to put on stage lines of conflict that have been either erased or fractured by analyses based upon a division of skills between ‘politicians’ or experts in this or that science. Politics is a public stage that is erected when there is no site that can legitimate domination, and when there is no science that can regulate its domain. Which is tantamount to saying that it is a fading configuration of the human world. Like political philosophy, and because of their very constitution, the social sciences spend their time covering up the lines that define political situations. Reconfiguring the field of the objects of history, sociology or political science so as to redraw those lines is a specific form of work. It is at once a task for a philosopher, and not a task for a philosopher. It is a task for a philosopher to the extent that it relates to the knowledges that divide up the domain of the political between them, to the philosophical decisions that constitute them as specific interpretations and negations of politics. It is not a task for a philosopher in the sense that philosophy itself is constituted as an archipolitics or a metapolitics. As a researcher and writer, my role is to build the common theoretical stage that can help us to understand the common political stage. It is to bring on stage equality and the conditions that make it effective, and to relate the division of knowledges to their ultimate contingency. In the final instance, the only things that exist over and beyond the division of skills between the philosopher, the historian and so on, are speaking beings, and groups of statements in a common language.

A symbolic violence

Passages: What is the most important aspect of democracy – equality or pluralism?

Rancière: I think it is basically equality. Effective pluralism means polemical pluralism, a pluralism that creates instances of equality. I do not think that pluralism consists in decreeing that there are so many categories within the population, and that they all have their rights, or that there are so many forms of culture which must be brought into line and which must recognize each other. In my view, that argument represents a farewell to democratic politics. It is now being proposed that we should replace democracy with, roughly speaking, an oligarchic state to represent the world capitalist system at the local level, and a sort of pluralism, a ‘democracy’ tailored to suit the needs of different groups. This presupposes a logic in which groups have to signal their existence as such, to signal that they belong to categories of groups, and therefore to categories that have rights.

Passages: Why did you chose the title *La Méésentente* [‘The Disagreement’] for your latest book?

Rancière: The notion of disagreement is clearly meant as a critique of both Lyotard’s theory of the differend, and Habermas’s theory of communicative action. Like Habermas, I think that debate is central to politics. On the other hand, I do not think that political interlocution corresponds to the model of communicative rationality. The latter presupposes that the parties involved have pre-established positions, and that their conflicting statements have a common referent. I think that the very nature of politics is such that the stage has not been built, that the object has not been recognized, and that the very partners in the debate have

not been legitimized, as such. Politics begins when it becomes apparent that the debate is about something that has not been noticed, when the person who says so is a speaker who has not been recognized as such and when, ultimately, that person's very status as a speaking being is in question.

Habermas's notion that dialogue can be regulated by the logic of contradiction therefore collapses. Dialogue is structured by misunderstanding. Contradiction does not come into play, because at least one of the elements that constitute the dialogic scene is not recognized by the other, who must be forced to include that element in its account of the situation. The political scene is therefore always symbolically violent. But, unlike Lyotard, I believe that this wrong can be discussed. The scene is never constituted symmetrically, in a homogeneous language, or with a single communicative logic. The scene can, however, be constituted, and it does have effects.

The fact that heterogeneous language games exist does not destroy politics or democracy. On the contrary, it constitutes politics. The wrong cannot be righted, but it can be discussed. And given that it can be discussed, it is neither beyond discussion nor irredeemable. I also try to argue against both the irenic logic that argues that communication can resolve problems, and the catastrophic political logic that is bound up with the 'heterogeneity of the regimes of sentences'. That logic leads to new versions of the Jerusalem/Athens dichotomy: politics becomes impossible because of some primal alterity or debt, because of a debt to the law of the Other that can never be repaid.

Passages: Could it be said that your conception involves an implicit political ethics? According to Arendt, politics means that equality excludes violence as a political act because violence means the curtailment of action, and the utilization of the Other. What is your definition of politics?

Rancière: One could say that politics is a peaceful or limited war. One of the founding ordinances of Athenian democracy that are ascribed to Solon is the curious ordinance that obliges citizens to take part in civil wars and stipulates that those who do not must be stripped of their civic rights. On the other hand, 'recalling bad things' was an offence in the Athens of the classical age, and one remembers Plato's astonishment on learning that condemned criminals were free to walk the streets. Politics is an extreme form of symbolic violence, an inescapable conflict over principles that allows violence to be controlled. Because it is a regulated symbolic violence, and because it institutionalizes a wrong and an alterity that can be discussed, politics is a substitute for war. And in the absence of politics, we do indeed see the reappearance of figures of an alterity that cannot be symbolized, and the reappearance of war to the death or generalized criminality.

It is as though politics were a specific and controlled form of violence that blocks other forms of violence. It is in that sense that there is such a thing as an ethics of politics: it is a specific way of handling conflict. It is when politics no longer exists that we begin to look for a mere ethics, and that we try to base politics on ethics. We appeal to the moral individual who supposedly exists inside the political individual, and who is supposedly the ultimate foundation, the ultimate guardian of the great principles. But there is no such thing as a moral individual who is more moral than the political individual. The moral individual always obeys *a certain morality*. And there are all sorts of moralities. Believing that we have to kill the 'infidel', or that Jews are not human, is also a matter of morality. It is when politics fails that we see all these 'moralities' coming into play. There is such a thing as an implicit political ethics and it is a specific way of handling conflict.

**Interviewed by F. Déotte-Beghdali, S. Douailler, C. Hurtado,
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