

**Rancière and Commitment: The Strange Place of the Politics and Style of Jacques Rancière in the  
Western-Marxist Tradition**

by

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## Abstract

A thinker of impurity, Rancière is most often read as proposing an alternative to the ontology of the political. Against the many attempts to restore a pure sense of politics and of its public space, Rancière maintains the place of politics in a common appearance that is identical to reality. Though typically seen as having broken with the Marxist tradition, I argue here that it is possible to find in his fragmentary style something like a negative dialectic. While politics is *what* his works address, it is also *how* it is addressed. Politics, and its assertion of an *apparently* impossible equality, must be lived out by critique and not merely described. In doing just this, Rancière offers a renewed take on the western-Marxist tradition's politics of aesthetics. Indeed, I maintain that Rancière, far from breaking with Marxism full stop, instead effects a reversal, a reversal of education into politics.

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## Introduction

Far from standing for a nostalgic attachment to a populist past lost by our entry into the global post-industrial society, Rancière's thought today is more actual than ever: in our time of the disorientation of the left, his writings offer one of the few consistent conceptualizations of how we are to continue to resist.<sup>1</sup>

-Slavoj Žižek

If Rancière can be said to be a Marxist at all, there is no doubt that he is a strange Marxist. Asked once in an interview to describe how he saw the interaction between the critique of political economy and his politics, Rancière asserted that there was neither politics, democracy, nor socialism without the attendant forms of economic organization.<sup>2</sup> Politics and economics for him tended towards each other in such a way that it is impossible to claim that there is a true economic order under that of politics. Where it was that Rancière maintained his politics was indissociable from the economic however was in asking if, in the face of domination today, anything is left for us to do. Here his assertion of the (*apparently* impossible) capacity of everyone, Rancière's central axiom, could not be removed from economics, not because the economic would make up, as Louis Althusser would have it, some last order of determination, but on the contrary because Rancière maintains that in approaching the question in terms of orders of determination, we cede the very space in which the equal capacity of everyone finds itself.

If emancipation is to be a lived emancipation, one that amounts to more than an endless demonstration of the omnipotence of the capitalist machine, then it will for Rancière need to be one that cracks open the unity of the given through the action of uncounted and apparently impossible capacities.<sup>3</sup> It will need to be an emancipation that draws on those capacities that the current socio-political configuration denies, and that sets them in that common space, that *common sensible*, which ties the world of equality to that of inequality. The problem for Rancière is not to say that we live in a world of inequality, or to separate the economic from the political, but is rather to show that what

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Lesson of Rancière," afterword to *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, by Jacques Rancière, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill, (London: Continuum, 2004), 79.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, *La méthode de l'égalité: Entretien avec Laurent Jeanpierre et Dork Zabunyan*, (Paris: Bayard, 2012), 309-13.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott, (London: Verso, 2011), 43-9.

makes inequality possible is its place in a sensible world –a common space– where equality is itself *always and already* possible.<sup>4</sup>

Of course Rancière is not typically read as a Marxist. Despite his initial contributions to Althusser's *Reading Capital* and his subsequent dabbling in Maoism, Rancière, at least in the English speaking world, is a figure most often cast in a break with the Marxist tradition.<sup>5</sup> His play of politics and police, which he initially set out in *Disagreement* and for which he has received widespread recognition and garnered significant interest, finds itself much more easily in poststructuralist terms than it does in those of western-Marxism, especially those of its French structuralist vein. Here the reading of Rancière is most often split between those who would find in his work a contribution to the 'ontology of the political',<sup>6</sup> and those who read Rancière as insisting on an unexpected politics that refuses all ontology.<sup>7</sup> For both camps, the appeal of Rancière's play of politics and police, which does away with the idea that politics is about either governing or the legitimization of power, is that it does politics anew, and that it does it in a way that is in keeping with the proclivities of the generation of '68.

Regardless of whether Rancière is read as participating in either a pure or an impure politics, here there is a general view that his critique of (metapolitical) demystification precludes him from *any and all kinds* of Marxism. For Rancière there is no reason that could reveal a true way of things hidden beneath a false theatre of appearance. For him (illusory) appearance is not to be convicted by a latent reason embedded in the fact of things; instead his play of politics and police asserts that appearance and reality are themselves identical.<sup>8</sup> Rancière's Marxism, if there is such a thing, certainly then cannot be one that would, in an orthodox fashion, set the world right (side-up) by dispelling illusion or demystifying reality. His cannot be a Marxism that reveals.<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging then that there is a distance

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. by Julie Rose, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 34-5.

<sup>5</sup> As Emanuel Renault notes "Rancière only became 'Rancière' after having launched a critical campaign against Althusser." See: Emmanuel Renault, "The Many Marx of Jacques Rancière," in *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality*, ed. by Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross, 164-86, (London: Continuum, 2012), 167.

<sup>6</sup> See especially: Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Rancière and Contemporary Political Ontology," *Theory & Event* 6.4 (2003). and Andrew Schaap, "Hannah Arendt and the Philosophical Repression of Politics," in *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality*, ed. by Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross, 145-65, (London: Continuum, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> See especially: Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 18-21. and Davide Panagia, *The Poetics of Political Thinking*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions," in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, edited by Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts, 273-288, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 280.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 148-9.

between Rancière and at least a demystifying Marxism, how can the question of Rancière's Marxism be approached?

For his own part, where Rancière does engage directly with Marxism, it is almost always as a reproach. Marxism for him is metapolitics, and metapolitics, like all of political-philosophy's attempts to solve the paradox of politics, to resolve the problem of equality by means of a proper configuration of community, is radically opposed to politics itself. Political-philosophy, along with most of what is normally taken to be politics, for Rancière is instead policing, and finds its place not in politics but in the police order. Rancière adamantly maintains that if politics is to be something at all, it most certainly is not the police.<sup>10</sup> In *Disagreement* Rancière talks about the police in terms of the logic of a count, of political-philosophy's division of the whole of the city, of the community, into its *axiai*, its parts.<sup>11</sup> Aristotle's Athens for example has three, that of the *oligoi*, the *aristoi*, and finally that of the *demos*. Each of these parts has a place in the city, which is itself in turn made up by a count of these parts and of the positive properties that they bring to the community –respectively: wealth, excellence and freedom. What Rancière maintains is that there is a double sense to this police count. There is the *counting* of the parts that make up the whole, but there is also in this an assertion of why each part *counts* when it comes to the meaning of the whole, the community that results. The police count in this way functions as an *account* in that for a part to be *counted* it must for the police order first *count* towards the whole. Put somewhat differently the police count is something like a sociological classification, a *classifying* of society. As a particular symbolic constitution of the social, the police count is a totalization, a consensual configuration of sensory-experience as a total and internally self-evident distribution of the sensible.<sup>12</sup>

Politics on the other hand always runs up against this would-be totality, everywhere marking the paradoxical part of those who have no part through the disidentifying experience of equality,<sup>13</sup> through the impossibility of establishing any complete and final sense of community through its *arkhê* (origin).<sup>14</sup> For Rancière “there is politics –and not just domination– because there is a wrong count of the parts of the whole”<sup>15</sup>, because the whole can never be completely counted, because its particularities can never be totally accounted for. Metapolitics then, along with Platonic archipolitics and Aristotelian

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. by Steven Corcoran, (London: Continuum, 2010), 27-44.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 36-7.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

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parapolitics,<sup>16</sup> fundamentally attempts to identify politics with the police and in this way seeks to achieve politics via the elimination of its central, constitutive paradox<sup>17</sup> –the fundamental homonymy of the *wrong* of politics, the (mis)count of the parts of the community, and of the *community* in which this included and yet excluded part finds itself only as a part for those with no part.<sup>18</sup>

As a particular achievement-elimination of politics, metapolitics is one that seizes upon the gap between names and things –the gap between the order of meaning and identification that counts the parts of the whole and the actuality that this count can only ever represent– and everywhere asserts the falsehood of those forms of politics which would either ignore or instrumentalize this gap, as do archipolitics and parapolitics respectively. In a word, Rancière’s metapolitics can be summarized as the totalizing practice of a particularly Althusserian ‘ideology’. For him “ideology is a word that signals the completely new status of the true that metapolitics forges: *the true as the truth of the false*.”<sup>19</sup> It is the status of the truth as nothing more than the index of a false and illusory appearance. An appearance that would exist only to conceal and to mystify the reality of inequality. For Rancière this truth finds its particular strength only through the demonstration of its own ineffectiveness. That is, in “deciphering the symptoms of a malady of civilization,”<sup>20</sup> all the while lauding an autonomy of critique that is nothing but the reverse side of its illusory capacity,<sup>21</sup> its self-isolation from the heteronomy of appearances, and its resignation of any means of materialization.

Considering the harshness with which Rancière addresses the Marxist tradition and the ferventness with which the literature distances his writings from those of Critical Theory, it is perhaps not surprising that Rancière’s work has generated relatively little interest among Marxist scholars. Here the tendency among those few that have is to respond in kind to Rancière’s highly generalized and at times overly broad critique of metapolitics; to accept his break with Marxism at face value and to simply discount his critiques as being too sweeping or modish to be worthy of serious engagement.<sup>22</sup> Admittedly Rancière’s treatment of Marx is inconsistent at best. As Emmanuel Renault notes, while Rancière’s work might well be Marxian in style and *committed* to the strengthening of those spaces

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<sup>16</sup> Terms that will be discussed later in the thesis.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 63.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 85. (emphasis added)

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 40.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>22</sup> Amusingly this might well be the foremost mark of Rancière’s Marxism given, as Martin Jay quips, the tendency of its western tradition to exhibit a fierce narcissism of small differences. Martin Jay, *Marxism & Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 10.

where equality is materialised,<sup>23</sup> the position of Marx himself in Rancière's work is split.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, Rancière's Marx is the humanist Marx that serves as the antagonist in Althusser's scientific Marxism, this is the young Marx whose aphorisms critique the alienation brought about by capitalism. While on the other, his Marx is also that Marx of *Capital* whose historical optimism serves as the very base for Althusser's scientific reading. Where the former is usually used by Rancière to establish – importantly with a definite generosity – the sense in which Marx is writing, the latter takes its place at the rhetorical point of Rancière's critique, as a demonstration of the illusory capacity of a historically optimistic Marxism.

It is, however, unfair to Rancière's polemic style to allow his critique of Marxism to be reduced to only those moments where it is directly addressed. Far from choosing, as Slavoj Žižek claims,<sup>25</sup> the 'political side' over the 'economic side' in Edgar Rubin's two-faces or vase scenario,<sup>26</sup> Rancière's thought is one that defies the very parameters through which Rubin's scenario functions as a paradox. Though the terms in which Rancière writes facilitate the task of reading his thought into a broadly construed poststructuralist tradition,<sup>27</sup> Rancière certainly should not be classed among those 'poststructuralists' whose infinite play of displacement, difference and non-identity is a joyous-maniacal response to the misery, brutality and meaninglessness of contemporary life in a global consumer society.<sup>28</sup> What performativity might be seen in Rancière's sense of politics as the conflict over the existence of a common stage has much less to do with a theory of language than it does with how it is that this common scene is constituted.<sup>29</sup> While Rancière's politics can certainly be seen as one of disidentification, to subsume it *entirely* into a critique of demystification and a rejection of determination in the last instance ignores the specificity of Rancière's critique of Marxism.

More than a disservice to the particularity of his work, this subsumption masks what I maintain can be seen as Rancière's significance and his contribution to the western-Marxist tradition. For all his chiding of Marxist metapolitics and of its tradition of critique, Rancière remains in the end fundamentally committed to an emancipatory politics axed on the equality of everyone. In maintaining

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<sup>23</sup> This will be central for this thesis, and we will consider at length the nature of this commitment later on. But for now, see Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 88.

<sup>24</sup> Emmanuel Renault, "The Many Marx of Jacques Rancière," 184-6.

<sup>25</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Lesson of Rancière," 75-6.

<sup>26</sup> That from any given perspective one must choose to see *either* the two faces *or* the vase, that one can see *either* politics *or* economics.

<sup>27</sup> Gabriel Rockhill, and Philip Watts, "Jacques Rancière: Thinker of Dissensus," introduction to *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, edited by Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1-3.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism & Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, 512.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Rancière, *La méthode de l'égalité: Entretien avec Laurent Jeanpierre et Dork Zabunyan*, 66.

the place of appearance in reality, the inscription of equality and inequality on a common stage or in a shared image,<sup>30</sup> he is marking the tautological status of that distribution of the sensible, of that police totality, that in seeking to eliminate the problem of politics cannot but attempt to ground inequality in the very stuff of equality. The action of Rancière's politics, and its admittedly self-delusory *as if*,<sup>31</sup> is not to deny the reality of exploitation, oppression and inequality, but is instead to seize the knot that ties equality to this very inequality, oppression and exploitation. It is to handle "the knot so as to tip the balance, to enforce the presumption of equality tied up with the presupposition of inequality and increase its power."<sup>32</sup> In the end, Rancière maintains that it is always possible to break up the tautology of being-*there*. While there is admittedly a certain delusion in demonstrating a capacity, an equality, denied by the status quo, he maintains that it is this very act of delusion, this assertion of an apparently impossible account (what he will call *subjectification*) that makes it possible to find the "disjunctive junction between *a being-there* and the reason for *that being-there*. It is possible to disentangle in every case the *as if* which is involved in the "that's the way it is,"<sup>33</sup> that maintains *as is* the world of inequality and exploitation. The action of Rancière's politics then is take the world *as is* and to reconfigure it on the basis of an *as if* that posits the equal capacity of everyone.

To say then that Rancière effects a break with Marx is perhaps less accurate than to say that he effects a break with Althusser's scientific Marx. A Marx that has for the most part been separated from his earlier critique of alienation, and from the themes that initially brought Rancière to the study of Marx.<sup>34</sup> Far from effecting a complete break with the Marxist tradition write-large, I posit that it is possible to read Rancière as bringing about a very particular break with a very particular Marxism. Indeed, I argue that it is possible to read Rancière's critique of metapolitics as a reconfiguration rather than as a disavowal. Here what I maintain is that Rancière, through the force of his style, manages not only to find the stakes of his politics in a historical understanding of the common sensible, but that *the way* in which he achieves this, ultimately comes to look a lot like a negative dialectic of sorts.

In many respects, then, my aim is to arrive at a reading of Rancière that might serve as a bridge between the more poststructural reading of him as a thinker of impurity, one made most prominently by Samuel Chambers, and the aesthetic theory of Theodor W. Adorno and the western-Marxist tradition more generally. To do this I have tried to set the reading of Rancière's impure politics more heavily in

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions," 274.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis added)

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Rancière, *La méthode de l'égalité: Entretien avec Laurent Jeanpierre et Dork Zabunyan*, 16.

the terms of his work on aesthetics. Rather than seeing his writings on art and the history of artistic form as an aside to his writings on politics, I have chosen here to pursue more thoroughly his claim that *politics is aesthetic in principle*.<sup>35</sup> In a way not entirely dissimilar to either Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin or the writers of the Frankfurt school, Rancière maintains that there is a historicity to aesthetic form that extends well beyond the experience of the work of art. Politics and art are tied for him because politics in the modern age always takes place in and through a particular and historically laden distribution of the sensible, a regime of artistic form he refers to as the *aesthetic regime*. Within this regime aesthetic form becomes “a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience.”<sup>36</sup> Politics for Rancière then revolves around this delimitation not only of what can be seen and heard, but of who possess the capacity to see and say, and in what places they are and are not to do so.

Where Rancière most notably parts company with the aestheticians of the western-Marxist tradition is in setting the politics of aesthetics towards a critique of the concept of revolution and of emancipation itself. Here what Rancière maintains is that the roots of the metapolitical concept of revolution –what he specifically calls *the aesthetic revolution*– are to be found in the project of romantic education. Carried on from Friedrich Schiller and the original scene set out by the romantics is the assertion that the means of true freedom is held by only an elite few whose task it is to impart the otherwise incapable masses with the capacity to be more than passive recipients of sense and world. The task through this education is to lend to the whole of humanity the means of an active-determinability, the means to determine rather than be determined by their material conditions. The difficulty for the Marxist iteration of this, Rancière notes, is that it is itself drawn from a class-hierarchy, one that is the product of a distribution that has already allotted a time and means for this particular capacity to some and denied it to others.<sup>37</sup> What I propose here is that it is this attribution of capacity and its stakes in a prior distribution of the sensible that are the chief targets of Rancière’s break with metapolitics. The most prominent feature of the landscape separating Rancière from metapolitics then is not *of itself* the critique of demystification, but is rather the metapolitical demystification’s complicity maintaining *as is* the world of inequality, in maintaining inequality in the very name of its abolition.

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<sup>35</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 58.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill, (London: Continuum, 2004), 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-4.

If Rancière can be seen to have a place in the Marxist tradition it is in his reversal of this education into his own sense of politics. The reading that I am seeking to layout then is one that would emphasise the commitment to the materialization of equality his politics demands, without at the same time minimizing his critique of that stultifying Marxism which would carry on (almost unaltered) the project of romantic aesthetics education and the aesthetic revolution. A reading that would recognise the historical space in which politics always already finds itself, without at the same time reducing politics to its proper space, to a pure politics tied to the ontology of the political.

To this end I have limited my reading mostly to those works that have appeared in English and that have followed Rancière's publication of *La méésentente* in 1995,<sup>38</sup> first published in English as *Disagreement* in 1999. And while I do make recourse to some of his earlier texts, especially *The Ignorant Schoolmaster (Le maître ignorant, 1987)*,<sup>39</sup> I have tried to confine myself to those works that have found a certain popularity among English-speaking political-theorists. These, along with *Disagreement*, include *The Politics of Aesthetics (Le Partage du sensible, 2000)*,<sup>40</sup> *The Emancipated Spectator (Le Spectateur émancipé, 2008)*,<sup>41</sup> *Dissensus*,<sup>42</sup> and *Figures of History (Figures de l'histoire, 2012)*.<sup>43</sup> I have also drawn from *La méthode de l'égalité*, a long-form interview, which has not as of yet been translated into English.

I have structured this thesis in three chapters, which while not necessarily being a direct progression, do nevertheless fold into each other somewhat –this is particularly the case for chapter three which builds on the sense of commitment and reversal from chapter one and the senses of history from chapter two. Here I have tried to do justice to Rancière's style by approaching each chapter as a particular and polemic intervention that seeks to avoid reducing the paradoxical play of his thought to a structured series of definite moments. Part of this entails trying to avoid direct definitions of his terms and concepts. Here I have instead tried, through negation and parallelism, to establish a clear sense of Rancière's writings in a working through of his texts by taking up his terms and concepts in multiple ways and from a number of different perspectives. Here my hope is that my dislocations will help to lend a *sense* to the many meanings of Rancière's terms without at the same time doing a disservice to his pedagogical project. Put differently, my hope is to try and present *an* account rather than to set out a

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Rancière, *La méésentente: politique et philosophie*, (Paris: Galilée, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Le maître ignorant: cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle*, (Paris: Fayard, 1987).

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible: esthétique et politique*, (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000).

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé*, (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> *Dissensus* does not appear in French as a single work, the majority of its chapters are essays individually published in French after 1995 and subsequently translated into English.

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Figures de l'histoire*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2012).

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definitive account of the way things are. In this of course my work is only a partial success, as I do not think that a *complete* departure from the method of the explicator –that explains (and imposes) *the* way that things are– is possible –not would I claim that such a *complete* departure is Rancière’s aim. Instead my aim has been to relive his sense of politics as something that is *done* in writing on it, and to do so in a way that maintains the many paradoxes found in his thought.

I have also, given the overall aim of my project, introduced into my account of Rancière a number of terms and concepts common with the writers of the Frankfurt school but that are not necessarily Rancière’s own. Where I have done this, often by means of reiteration, of repetition, my aim is to enrich the meaning of Rancière’s terms and impart them with a sense which would help to locate them within the broader context of western-Marxism.

In chapter one I address the sense of commitment that is demanded by Rancière’s politics and the primary aesthetic through which it comes about. Focusing on his reading of Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* I argue that rather than reading Rancière foremost as a critic of demystification, Rancière should be read as a critic of stultifying pedagogy and of its attendant illusory capacities. There I note that where it is that Marxist metapolitics is criticised most harshly, is where it carries over the hierarchy of the romantic aesthetics it succeeded, where it preserves what is effectively a class based attribution of capacity and incapacity. For Rancière the task of Schiller’s poet, Marx’s educator and Gramsci’s organic intellectual is similarly to impart the masses of the incapable with a capacity for active-determinability, with the capacity to realize a freedom and autonomy that has only ever existed in thought. Against the romantic assumption of an active-autonomy of mind that is forever set within the heteronomy of its own (material) condition, Rancière effects a reversal, positing instead an autonomy of free appearance that can only be approached through the heteronomy of form, knowledge and power. What Rancière accomplishes through this reversal of autonomy and heteronomy in aesthetic play is to bring about a reversal of capacities, a reversal of education into politics, but a reversal that nevertheless preserves a primary aesthetic kernel.

In chapter two I turn the focus towards the place of history in Rancière’s thought, arguing that while the wrong of his sense of politics is always played out in terms of the homonymy of wrong and community, the stakes of his politics are nevertheless taken from the common conflict and space in which they are always and already situated. The historical character of the common sensible and of the double life of the objects that find themselves in it lends to Rancière’s thought something of a dialectical-materialism. By setting up his sense of history as a common ontological tenor, a common space that would provide the stage for the conflictual staging of worlds, Rancière opens up the

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possibility of reading his politics historically. While everyone and everything makes history for Rancière, this making is always doubled by the fact that whoever and whatever *makes* history was always and already first *made* by history. What this suggests is that politics is historical in both a local and particular sense, in as much as politics is always carried out within a historically laden common sensible, but also that it is historical in a universal sense because its polemic situates politics and its stakes by means of the very totality, the very count, it seeks to mark as tautology, as miscount.

Finally, in chapter three, I set Rancière's writing, his style and his sense of commitment, in juxtaposition with that of Adorno. There my aim, drawing on his critique of metapolitics, is to see if in the senses of commitment and history in his writing—in how they are carried out in a fragmentary style—there is something that might be likened to Adorno's negative dialectic. Using that body of work on Adorno's style to inform a reading of Rancière I try to approach Rancière's treatment of totality and set out more clearly its complex relation with the stakes of his politics. What I argue is that the stakes of Rancière's politics are always at once local *and universal*. That despite his prioritization of the local and the particular his writing does not completely escape the universal sense of a unified historical process which lingers on in his commitment to equality. The practice of the *as if* is a splitting up of the tautology not only of being, but of being-*there*, and I maintain that it is, from this, possible to understand Rancière's commitment as a thematization, as a stylistic unity that is to be found not necessarily *in* his account of politics, but rather *as* his account, something which in this way lives out the very commitment he lays out in his writing.

## Chapter 1 - The Reconfigured Aesthetic Scene

Just as the nobility of Art *survived* the nobility of Nature, so now Art goes before her, a voice rousing from slumber and preparing the shape of things to come. Even before Truth's triumphant light can penetrate the recesses of the human heart, the poet's imagination will intercept its rays, and the peaks of humanity will be radiant while the dews of night still linger in the valley.<sup>1</sup>

-Friedrich Schiller

Schiller occupies a unique and somewhat awkward position within Rancière's thought. A clear influence on the aesthetic quality of his thinking, Schiller remains an enigmatic and somewhat doubled figure within his work. On the one hand, Rancière's Schiller is quite orthodox: his 'Aesthetic State' is cast as an attempt to bring about the equality promised and missed by the French Revolution, and his aesthetics are seen as an attempt to secure this unheard of equality by confining it to the exercise of a learnt aesthetic capacity.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Rancière's Schiller is a radically revisited and reconfigured Schiller, a Schiller already read through the lens of Rancière's democratic politics and adjusted to its sensibilities. This, is the unsurpassable Schiller whose notion of 'play' is central to arriving at a sensible experience that is –if only momentarily– free of hierarchy.<sup>3</sup>

To be clear, to say that Schiller exists as a doubled figure in Rancière's work is not to charge Rancière with contradiction, nor is it to suggest that Schiller, *qua* Rancière, must necessarily be taken paradoxically. It is instead to see Rancière's politics at work within his own thought, to see that in his thought stand two distinct yet symbiotic readings of Schiller. A historical Schiller whose effect on the aesthetic revolution as well as on romantic and Marxist understandings of emancipation is noted and criticized, and a reconfigured Schiller whose aesthetic promise is read against himself and set at the core of the very politics by which he is reconfigured.

This doubling is of course not unique to Schiller. Samuel Chambers, in setting out Rancière's politics as a necessarily impure politics, talks about it in terms of a doubling of politics, of a politics that is *always* and *already* doubled.<sup>4</sup> Here Chambers stresses that politics as a *taking* place –in the doubled

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, ed. and trans. by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2005), 57.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill, (London: Continuum, 2004), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, *La méthode de l'égalité: Entretien avec Laurent Jeanpierre et Dork Zabunyan*, (Paris: Bayard, 2012), 137-8.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Chambers, "Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics," *European Journal of Political Theory* 10 (2011): 316.

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sense of both happening and seizing— always opposes the police from within its own terms.<sup>5</sup> Taken in this sense, the doubled figure of Schiller is what allows Rancière to think in aesthetic terms without necessarily having to ground himself in the philosophical structure provided to him by Schiller and the romantics —what he identifies as the original articulation of what he calls the *aesthetic regime*<sup>6</sup> or tie his own democratic politics to a metapolitical project garnered from of an aestheticized Marxist conception of revolution —a project he refers to as the *aesthetic revolution*.<sup>7</sup> The doubling is, in this way, what keeps Rancière’s thought both committed and ungrounded, what allows for it to have a highly fluid and essayistic style that does not pay for its free play at the price of its critical purpose.

Where Schiller’s position within Rancière’s thought becomes unique is where it concerns *its own reconfiguration* —the redoubling of Rancière’s Schiller. While Rancière’s politics is often seen, particularly among political theorists, as being not only anti-philosophical —in the sense of it being impure and anti-systematic— but understood in a clear opposition and distinction from the project of political philosophy, his work on aesthetics goes somewhat against such a clear separation of politics from philosophy. Unlike his treatment of politics in terms of the ‘part of those who have no part’, Rancière’s engagement with both the ‘politics of aesthetic’ and the ‘aesthetics of politics’ is not set in a complete falsification of the object of his criticism. Rancière, while critical of the aesthetic regime’s philosophical-aesthetics model, does not discount its effectiveness entirely, nor does he exclude it completely from his own thought.

To talk then about Schiller’s position in Rancière’s thought being awkward, is to accent the ambiguity that comes from the doubling that this Ouroborian play of politics and the aesthetic regime demands. Chambers maintains that with Rancière there is no pre-given politics and that unlike Jean-Luc Nancy, Rancière’s work should not be read as an attempt to found such a politics. Here, in as much as politics can be said to involve anything ‘originary’, it is merely the ‘originary taint’ of the ‘*sans-part*’, the wrong found “by whoever tries to found the community on its *arkhê* [origin].”<sup>8</sup> But even this quasi-original wrong is not itself isolated from the aesthetic regime and its notion of the police as a

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Chambers, “Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics,” 318.

<sup>6</sup> The aesthetic regime is, in its strictest sense, a regime of artistic identification defined by the use of aesthetic play in designating *an* object as an *art* object, an artwork. Unlike in the other regimes of art (the ethical regime and the representative regime), in the aesthetic regime an artwork is first off a common object and only becomes an art object when it is inhabited with the alien quality of *being art*. See: Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 20-30.

<sup>7</sup> The aesthetic revolution is the application of the framework of the aesthetic regime to revolutionary politics. It is the project that seeks to emancipate by means of aesthetic education, by means of imparting the masses with a capacity for aesthetic play. See: Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. by Steven Corcoran, (London: Continuum, 2010), 115-33.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*, trans. by Julie Rose, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 18.

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distribution of the sensible. The awkwardness of Schiller's position in Rancière's thought is in the strategy and commitment it demands of whatever it would be that would bring about a reconfiguration. While Chambers suggests that any future "Rancièrian reinvention of politics would have to start with the hierarchy, inequality, and structural domination of all social orders,"<sup>9</sup> the doubled figure of Schiller hints at the status of these tasks as prior commitments rather than as simply the product of Rancière's polemic.

The question then is, in a first place, what is the status of these commitments in Rancière's thought, and in a second place, what is it exactly that considering them and reading them into his work would necessarily entail? Trying here not to do undue violence to either his method or his politics, I ask if it is possible to see this strategic and committed dimension of Rancière's thought as itself being something of a reconfiguration. And it is here, I think, that the question of Rancière's place in the Marxist tradition along with the particular quality of his break with Marxism, need be considered more toughly. In many ways, behind Rancière's critique of Schiller's allotment of capacity is the avant-guard project of Marxism more generally and the aesthetic revolution in particular.

Though frequently set, perhaps for pragmatic reasons,<sup>10</sup> as a rather neat and straight-forward disavowal of his earlier first, Althusserian, and then Maoist writings, Rancière's thought nevertheless maintains an intimate relationship with Marx in general, and western-Marxism in particular. In the first few words of "The Many Marx of Jacques Rancière," Emmanuel Renault hints at the dialectic by which Rancière only becomes 'Rancière' in his break with the Althusserian tradition.<sup>11</sup> More than just a tongue-in-cheek jab at Rancière's position vis-à-vis dialectic thought (and that of a number of contemporary commentators),<sup>12</sup> and its varying para and metapolitical implications, Renault's quip points to something of an essential, if overlooked, element of Rancière's project: the latent dialectical-materialistic character of his aesthetic politics.

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel Chambers, "Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics," 319.

<sup>10</sup> As Emmanuel Renault aptly notes, given that Rancière's understanding of Marx does not unfold into a single neat progression away from his Althusserian education, but is rather a series of at times disparate relations with number of diverging readings of Marx, it is perhaps more methodologically sound to set Rancière's Marx as the highly philosophical Marx of the latter Rancière. See: Emmanuel Renault, "The Many Marx of Jacques Rancière," in *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality*, ed. by Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross, 164-86, (London: Continuum, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Renault, "The Many Marx of Jacques Rancière," 167.

<sup>12</sup> See especially: Samuel A. Chambers, "Politics," in *The Lessons of Rancière*, 39-64, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). and Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Rancière and contemporary Political Ontology," *Theory & Event* 6.4 (2003).

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Here what I would suggest is that Rancière's break with Marxism, rather than being a wholesale departure, is instead a break of a very particular kind. It is a break with that stultifying Marxism which would, in seeking emancipation as an active-determinability (an autonomous activity of thought that would reorder the heterogeneous world of sense, the material-conditions), carry on the hierarchy of its romantic-aesthetic predecessor, a break with that avant-gardist Marxism which, in seeking to give capacity to the incapable achieves its critical force by making its object omnipotent and unassailable, that ceaselessly participates in and reinforces its own melancholic incapacity. "The hidden secret," Rancière maintains contrary to Althusser, "is nothing but the obvious functioning of the machine."<sup>13</sup> For Rancière a lived emancipation is barred to those who maintain a ridged distinction between appearance and reality and who see their science as the only means to expose the truth of appearance.<sup>14</sup> What he maintains is needed instead, and what he sets about achieving in his aesthetic politics, is a new sensorium, one that diverges from the direction of the *Communist Manifesto* and its position of working-class 'victimhood',<sup>15</sup> and assumes in its place the paradoxical assumption of the capacity of the incapable. What is called for is subjectification, "the action of uncounted capacities that crack open the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the possible."<sup>16</sup>

My aim in this chapter, focusing on Rancière's treatment of the primary aesthetic, as something that evolves both out of and within Schiller's Aesthetic State, is to tease out the particular reversal at play in his aesthetic politics. To find in his critique of Schiller the initial contours of his reversal of stultifying education into his own democratic politics. In short, by establishing and understanding the hierarchy he sees in Schiller's letters on the aesthetic education of man and confronting them with the pedagogical project put forward by Rancière in his critique of Althusserian science, I posit that it is possible to concretize the sense of strategy and commitment that is in Rancière, and that allows him to keep a certain distance from the procedures of critical theory all the while retaining their emancipatory purpose. Here I would argue that it is possible to arrive at a reading that while retaining the polemic force of Rancière's style and thought, moves somewhat beyond the view of him as simply an ex-Marxist.

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott, (London: Verso, 2011), 44.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

### Life, Form and Beauty: Schiller's 'Original Scene'

The first task in approaching Rancière's aesthetic politics is to sort through what J. M. Bernstein suggests is a wobble in his aesthetic scheme.<sup>17</sup> Essentially, there is an ambiguity in Rancière's aesthetics that is added to whatever esotericism one might normally expect to find in the aesthetic, an ambiguity that comes from his simultaneous critique and reconfiguration of Schiller and the aesthetic mode of thought. On the one hand Rancière is quite clear, "aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity."<sup>18</sup> The metapolitical project of the aesthetic revolution, anchored in a teleological history and made autonomous by a mode of sensible being that locates art in common life, cannot, in the face of a monstrous society, but buckle over into a veneration of its own autonomy and end in a nihilistic politics of resignation;<sup>19</sup> the veneration of its own critical practice of its particular but ultimately empty truth in falseness. On the other hand, it is impossible, or if not strictly impossible certainly disingenuous, to speak of an aestheticization of politics, because politics *qua* Rancière is aesthetic in principle as it can only come about through and in a distribution of the sensible (despite always seeking to alter this very distribution).<sup>20</sup>

Essentially that mode of experience which Rancière maintains recognises the art object only by virtue of its being at once more and less than itself –that recognises the artwork's existence only through its alienated presence in a non-existent community of art– is the same as that mode by which Rancière recognises as paradox the wrong posed by the part of those who have no part. Rancière's critique of the aesthetic regime is delivered from within the mode of experience, the scene, that is the very object of his criticism. The twist here if you will is that Rancière, like Agatha Christie in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, has obscured the key to the mystery in the voice of the narrator. Delivered from a reconfigured aesthetic scene, Rancière's critique of the aesthetic regime's original scene obscures what it carries over from that original scene through its polemic and its politics.

To wade through this seemingly Ouroborian use of the aesthetic, it is necessary then to discern how Rancière's politics is set within a 'primary aesthetics' that is itself a reconfiguration of romantic

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<sup>17</sup> J. M. Bernstein, "Movies as the Great Democratic Art Form of the Modern World (Notes on Rancière)," in *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality*, ed. by Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross, 15-42, (London: Continuum, 2012), 26-7.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 133.

<sup>19</sup> For Rancière's critique of the aesthetic regime of the arts and its political project see especially: Jacques Rancière, "Artistic Regimes and the Shortcomings of the Notion of Modernity," in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 20-30. and, "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes," in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 115-33.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 58.

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aesthetics' original articulation –the aesthetic regime's original scene.<sup>21</sup> Put somewhat differently, the task is to grasp the specificity of his critique of the aesthetic regime's philosophical-aesthetic model, all the while recognizing that its shortcomings are not tantamount either to its ineffectiveness or to its complete exclusion from Rancière's own thought and project. Here what I maintain is that Rancière's politics, despite whatever criticisms he might make of the aesthetic regime's autonomy, is nevertheless dependent on a common sensorium that is essentially an analog of that very regime's content filled infinity –its heteronomous sense of autonomy– to retain the polemic force of the wrong in subjectification. Absent this particular infinity's play of autonomy and heteronomy, which is itself the very heart of Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic state, it is difficult to present Rancière's politics as a reconfiguration without giving politics either an essence or a proper space from which to launch its disruption. Rather than being the complete departure from philosophy some authors hail it as, Rancière's aesthetic politics would instead be something of a reversal of Romantic aesthetics' (as well as of its Marxist successors) particular allotment of capacities. *A reversal of education into politics that preserves a primary aesthetic kernel.*

For his own part, Rancière already hints at this dependence on Schiller's aesthetic state when he suggests that *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* –the aesthetic regime's first manifesto–<sup>22</sup> establishes something on an unsurpassable position.<sup>23</sup> The sense of politics in his 'politics of aesthetics' while no doubt denoting that politics which emerges within, and as a result of, the aesthetic regime's particular allotments, would also take on the double sense of a reconfiguration of the regime's original scene; that is, a reconfiguration of Schiller's aesthetic state. Schiller's manifesto then would be only *somewhat* unsurpassable, in as much as in Rancière's move from (his reconfiguration of) the aesthetic state to a common sensorium, he retains the aesthetic state's sense of an infinity filled with content, all the while dispensing with this infinity's unique ties to Beauty, the autonomy of art and its particular attribution of autonomy and heteronomy (which Schiller sees in terms of the autonomy of an active mind set against

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<sup>21</sup> This particular ambiguity is similar to what Gabriel Rockhill suggests is Rancière's double definition of politics. The aesthetic like Rancière politics, is both the topic at hand and the very means through which that topic is engaged with. See: Gabriel Rockhill, "The Politics of Aesthetic: Political History and the Hermeneutics of Art," in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts, 195-215, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> The "Ninth Letter" being among the starkest examples of this proto avant-gardist program. "Impart to the world you would influence a *Direction* towards the good, and the quite rhythm of time will bring it to fulfilment. You will have given it this direction if, by your teaching, you have elevated its thoughts to the Necessary and the Eternal, if, by your actions and your creations, you have transformed the Necessary and the Eternal into an object of the heart's desire." Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, 59. (emphasis in original)

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 23-4.

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the heteronomy of material reality, and which Rancière reverses to become the heteronomy of power and knowledge set against the autonomy of free appearance). The question then becomes, in a first place, how with Schiller is Beauty tied to the particularities of the aesthetic state –to the sense of autonomy its objects acquire by means of their very heteronomy and to the sense of humanity it allows– and in a second place, to what extent is Rancière’s surviving primary aesthetics –and ultimately his aesthetic politics– coloured by his reconfiguration and break with this original link?

For Schiller the properly aesthetic is play in an infinity filled with content, namely in beauty. The particularity of this infinity stands distinct from the ‘empty’ infinity that is provided to humankind by nature, in that unlike the empty infinity –the infinity of Reason, the abstract and absolute unity which is simply the satisfaction of the form-drive–<sup>24</sup> the content filled infinity of the aesthetic state is the satisfaction in concert of both the form-drive –which as noted, by reason desires absolute unity– and the sense-drive –which by nature insists on multiplicity.<sup>25</sup> For Schiller aesthetic play is necessary to move humankind from a state where they are merely human, to one where they are truly human *beings*.<sup>26</sup> The difficulty, Schiller suggests, with the positions advanced by either the metaphysician or the physicist, and against which his own position is developed, is that neither allows for the *existence* of a human *being*; the formulation of which he asserts is fundamentally aesthetic. “Only inasmuch as [a person] changes does he *exist*; only inasmuch as he remains unchangeable does *he* exist.”<sup>27</sup>

The physicist and the metaphysician can themselves each only account –respectively– for a half of this chiasmus. “Even as the metaphysician is unable to account for the limitations imposed upon freedom and autonomy of the mind by sensation, so the physicist is unable to comprehend the infinity which, at the instigation of those limitations, manifests itself within the Personality.”<sup>28</sup> The project of either then is bound in the satisfaction of only one of the drives set about by the empty infinity –sense for the physicist, form for the metaphysician. For both, Schiller maintains, freedom remains either entirely elusive or where freedom as a term is found, it denotes merely the first-order freedom of natural possibility.

As long as man, in that physical state, is merely a passive recipient of the world of sense, i.e. does no more than feel, he is still completely One with that world; and just because he is nothing but world, there exists for him as yet no world. Only when, at the aesthetic

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<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 75. (emphasis in original)

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

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stage, he puts [the world] outside himself, or contemplates it, does his personality differentiate itself from it, and a world becomes manifest to him because he has ceased to be One with it.<sup>29</sup>

The second-order freedom that Schiller locates in the aesthetic state then is a freedom set in the total human experience, one that whilst being both real (involved in determination and life) and active (involved in thought and form), cannot be the exclusive object of either drive. It cannot be form since it would lack existence, and it cannot be life since it would lack being or presence. Instead, it must be both the state of our being and activity we perform, the setting of each drive to the satisfaction of the other, it must in short be *living form*.

With Schiller only play (the drive proper to the aesthetic state) in beauty is capable of making up this living form. It alone holds the proof that the limitations and necessity of the material do not need to be extended to thought and morality, and it alone marks the possibility of an active determinability that is not paid for at the price of reality.

[Beauty] is indeed an object for us, because reflection is the condition of our having any sensation of it; but it is at the same time a state of the perceiving subject, because feeling is a condition of our having any perception of it. Thus beauty is indeed form, because we contemplate it; but it is at the same time life, because we feel it.<sup>30</sup>

Aesthetic experience is unique then in that unlike thought or sense, play allows for feeling to inhabit form and for thought to have life. While Schiller maintains philosophy's ability to seize on the movements of beauty, on the actions of the form and sense drive, he nevertheless insists that denied life, these movements remain frozen in contradiction or paradox and as a result the mystery of beauty and the magic of play –and ultimately its promise of freedom– is lost.

In order to lay hold of the fleeting phenomenon, [the philosopher] must first bind it in fetter of rule, tear its body to pieces by reducing it to concepts, and preserve its living spirit in a sorry skeleton of words. Is it any wonder that natural feeling cannot find itself again in such an image, or that in the account of the analytic thinker truth should appear as paradox?<sup>31</sup>

If Schiller ties freedom to the aesthetic state, it is because for him only in art and its contemplation –in play in beauty– is humankind able to overcome the contradictory demands of form and sense and be more than mere life or isolated thought.

At the same time however the autonomy of this beauty – art's *unique* claim to living form– brings along with its freedom a certain avant-gardist project and a definite hierarchy. For Schiller, the promise of art and the contemplation of its beauty is not a general mode of experience. Rather, it is a

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<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, 183.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.,5.

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mode available only to the aesthetically educated, the artist, the capable.<sup>32</sup> The freedom offered by Schiller's aesthetics is a freedom that is carried by only a handful of 'finely tuned souls'.<sup>33</sup> It is a freedom tied to a capacity that needs to be disseminated through the whole of humanity –the masses of the incapable– if it is to overcome utility and become itself the spirit of the age. It is this exclusivity of capacity, this monopoly of aesthetic experience, that Rancière seizes on when he set the autonomy of art at the heart of the folly of the aesthetic revolution's political project and Marxist avant-gardism's metapolitics.

Schiller's aesthetic program, Rancière maintains, offers up a reality hidden from those who do not know how to understand it, from those who do not know how to *actively* engage with the reality it opens up and are instead *passively* determined by their condition. Here Rancière notes:

Behind the Kantian definition of aesthetic judgement as a judgement without concepts, Schiller indicates the political distribution that is the matter at stake: the division between those who act and those who are acted upon, between the cultivated classes that have access to a totalization of lived experience and the uncivilized classes immersed in the parcelling out of work and sensory experience.<sup>34</sup>

Schiller, for his part, would likely not see this division of action and sensory experience as being itself problematic. His thinking here is somewhat more conservative. For him the reality offered by the aesthetic state is more arcane and obscure than it is deliberately hidden. Play in beauty is a means of gradually bringing about freedom without jeopardizing "the very existence of society for a merely hypothetical (even though morally necessary) ideal of society."<sup>35</sup> While being careful to avoid the oversimplification of tying this guarded view on the transformation of society uniquely to the events of the French revolution,<sup>36</sup> and losing what might be his genuine belief in beauty's promise, it is nevertheless important not to overlook the implications of the context out of which both this caution and Schiller's division arose. Clearly, Schiller was not optimistic that the conditions for genuine social change could –or even perhaps, should– arise in his time.

As long as natural man still makes a lawless misuse of his licence, one can scarcely run the risk of letting him glimpse his liberty; and as long as civilized man as yet makes so little use of his liberty, one can hardly deprive him of his licence. The gift of liberal principles becomes a betrayal of society as a whole when it allies itself with forces still in ferment, and reinforces an already too powerful Nature. The law of conformity turns

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<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, 55-61.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 43-4.

<sup>35</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 27. and, Elizabeth M. Wilkinson, and L. A. Willoughby, introduction to *On The Aesthetic Education of Man: In A series of Letters*, by Friedrich Schiller, ed. and trans. by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), xv-xx.

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into tyranny *vis-à-vis* the individual when it is allied with an already prevailing weakness and physical limitation, and so extinguishes the last glimmering spark of independence and individuality.<sup>37</sup>

Aesthetic education, while certainly a rebuttal of metaphysics's particular project of moral education, is not a complete departure from its hierarchy. If for Schiller the pursuit of the freedom promised by metaphysics culminates in tyranny, it is because for him reason has not concerned itself enough with that *life* of artistic form. Though Schiller offers melting and energizing beauty as equal solutions to the faults of either 'natural man' or 'civilized man' (respectively),<sup>38</sup> there is little doubt that for him the law of civilized man present a tremendous progress over the lawlessness of natural man. With Schiller there is a sense that there is a clear progression from natural man to the aesthetically capable human being. For him, just as law brings civility to natural man, play in beauty brings freedom to civilized man.

Despite whatever failings Schiller might find in the harshness of reason, it is nevertheless for him the *activity* of thought that is the autonomous aspect of aesthetic experience. "He who never ventures beyond actuality," and into what is for him the admittedly barren and naked land of abstractions, "will never win the prize of truth."<sup>39</sup> However much for Schiller aesthetic experience might be the satisfaction as play of both the form and sense drives, it is the aspect of form for him that is generative. The *passive* determinability of the sense-drive, whilst no doubt the necessary condition of humankind's reality and existence, is in the end fundamentally heteronomous. It is simply that against which the refined mind learns to struggle, the coarse natural state which art and the aesthetic promise through their activity, their play, to transmute into a moral one.<sup>40</sup>

### Reversing Education into Politics

When Rancière, at the end of "Artistic Regimes and the Shortcomings of the Notion of Modernity," brings together his critique of the artistic avant-garde with that of the political avant-garde, it is by means of this attribution, this allotment of capacity for active experience first set out by Schiller in the original aesthetic scene.<sup>41</sup> The task of Schiller's poet,<sup>42</sup> like Marx's educator or Gramsci's organic intellectual, is to disseminate the means of this active determinability, to impart the incapable with capacity. And while many contemporary commentators, taking Rancière at his word, set the weight of

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<sup>37</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, 45-7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-15.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 176.

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 29-30.

<sup>42</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, 57.

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Rancière's critique of Marxism simply in terms of his rebuke of metapolitical demystification, I would suggest that it is instead his identification of this link between an emancipation understood in terms of an active-determinability and stultifying incapacity that is the more interesting and damning indictment. The charge that Marxism carries on romanticism's stultifying attribution of capacity more than any charge of being either a simple or essentializing teleology of historical evolution and rupture, is foremost among Rancière's critiques of Marxist thought as it, unlike any change of essentialism, cannot be easily resolved by invoking a more rigorous understanding of either dialectical-materialism or material-history.

This is not to say that his rebuke of demystification is insignificant. It is of course highly significant, especially when considering Rancière's earlier writing on pedagogy. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* Rancière maintains the seemingly paradoxical position that one can teach what one does not know.<sup>43</sup> Distinguishing the will from the intelligence within the pedagogical relationship, he argues that there are two types of learning.<sup>44</sup> There is a first type, which sees both the will and the intelligence of the student subjected to that of the master; this is the stultifying method of the explicator, which maintains the opposition of science and ignorance that maintains the need to explain the objects from an already established account. And there is a second type, which subjects only the will whilst linking the intelligence only through verification in a common medium, a common sensorium; this is the emancipatory 'universal' teaching of the ignorant schoolmaster, which posits a radical intellectual equality that everyone is already capable of not only understanding but of making their own account. Here what Rancière ultimately maintains is that "beneath the pedagogical relation of ignorance to science, the more fundamental philosophical relation of stultification to emancipation must be recognized."<sup>45</sup>

The difficulty however with situating an earlier work like *Proletarian Nights*, 1989 or *The Ignorant School Master*, 1991 amidst the project that has emerged from the writings of the later Rancière (from *Disagreement* and on) is that they seem markedly less concerned with stressing or problematizing the *content* of emancipation than the later works. While, as Gabriel Rockhill notes, Rancière's own distribution of the sensible is an overcoming of the typical form/content debate in politicized art,<sup>46</sup> the senses of both form and content retain their use in accessing Rancière's alternative. Again, in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* Rancière maintains that: "Whoever teaches without emancipating

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<sup>43</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant School Master: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 18.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>46</sup> Gabriel Rockhill, "The Politics of Aesthetic: Political History and the Hermeneutics of Art," 195-7.

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stultifies. And whoever emancipates doesn't have to worry about what the emancipated person learns. He will learn what he wants, nothing maybe."<sup>47</sup> Universal teaching, rather than being a clear method of emancipatory instruction, "was a benefit to be announced to the poor: they could do everything any man could."<sup>48</sup> It was a remedy to the lack of time and money which prevented the common man from acquiring instruction, the marking of their own capacity in the master's *tautological* capacity.<sup>49</sup> Blended seamlessly together here are both a formal and a content sense of commitment. Here in particular it is a more muted (content) concern for the lot of the poor that is animating and giving polemic force to Rancière's much more prominent (formal) critique of stultifying pedagogy. Perhaps given a false sense of shelter by their chronological proximity to his Althusserian writings and education,<sup>50</sup> Rancière's earlier works seem less guarded against the possibility of unpalatable conceptions of emancipation than his later works, which increasingly need to distinguish themselves from more right-wing critiques of demystification<sup>51</sup> –not to mention certain right-wing appropriations, which would seek to restore either a true order of politics, or a sense that everything is politics, something which Rancière claims make nothing political.<sup>52</sup>

To say then that Rancière's critique of Marxism and of its metapolitics lies somewhat beyond a critique simply of demystification is to insist on qualifying his critique with an insistence on a particular *efficacy*. Rancière, as he makes clear in "The Misadventure of Critical Thought," is not a post-critic. Those advocates of a right-wing frenzy who insist on the liquidity, fluidity and gaseousness of everything, and who mock those fading epigones who would continue to insist on the reality of reality, misery and wars, he asserts, are caught in the same logic as that on which they pour their vitriol.<sup>53</sup> Left-wing melancholy and right-wing frenzy for Rancière are quite simply two sides of the same coin, bound in the same way to a resignation of efficacy in the face of an overwhelming appearance.

This disconnection between critical procedure and their purpose strips them of any hope of effectiveness. The melancholics and the prophets don the garb of enlightened reason deciphering the symptoms of a malady of civilization. *But this enlightened reason emerges bereft of any impact on patients whose illness consists in not knowing themselves to be sick.* The interminable critique of the system is finally identified with a demonstration of the reason why this critique lacks any impact.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant School Master: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>50</sup> In the sense that a critique of Althusser delivered from a former Althusserian might reasonably be assumed to carry on its commitment whilst being critical of its failure to live up to that same commitment.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 30-2.

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 32.

<sup>53</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 40. (emphasis added)

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Setting Rancière's critique of Marxist metapolitics as a critique of demystification –as an error in its style or form– misses the point of its inadequacy and ineffectiveness in achieving its revolutionary ends. In *Disagreement*, speaking particularly about Marxism's class struggle and the failure of its science, his argument is not about the mistake of giving a philosophical-ontological privilege to a universal class, but is instead about Marxism's failure to seize in a non-illusory way on the very politics of that class struggle.

So metapolitics becomes the scientific accompaniment of politics, in which the reduction of political forms to the forces of class struggle is initially equivalent to the truth of the lie or the truth of illusion. But it also becomes a "political" accompaniment of all forms of subjectification, which posits as its hidden "political" truth *the class struggle it underestimates and cannot underestimate*.<sup>55</sup>

Marxism's error, then, is to tie its science to illusion and allow for this illusory science to tame politics in the very name of politics, to maintain the world of inequality in the very name of its critique.

For Rancière, the foremost harm of the critique of ideology's metapolitics is not its illusory capacity, its tautological truth, but is instead in the stultifying incapacity which follows from its claim to a monopoly of active-determinability, to its abandoning as false appearance the very common ground in which equality is always already possible.

The claim of "true" equality dismisses the reality of the operation of verification of equality. It dismisses it at the same time that it grasps the struggle over the as if in the pincers of appearance and reality. Appearance and reality are not opposed. A reality always goes along with an appearance. For sure, the joiner [who frees himself by nurturing a power of self-delusion] remains in the world of domination and exploitation. *But he is able to split up the tautology of being-there*. He is able to locate his ownership in the ownership of the master and the owner. He actually builds up a new sensible world in the given one. A verification of equality is an operation which grabs hold of the knot that ties equality to inequality.<sup>56</sup>

The joiner's experience is not only then an active-experience, but it is an active-experience that has no place in any teleological unfolding of human progress. It is a seizure of the movements of form and life that does not reduce the promise of the "as if" to the particular "as if" advanced by those few refined whose class position has allowed them an access to a particular totalization of lived experience. By contrast, Rancière suggests the critique of ideology, at the very moment when it would seize on and give the name of appearance to the monstrosity of society, surrenders its emancipatory promise by at once reducing it to only that promise permitted by the current allotment of capacities, all the while ensuring that very allotment's continuity by taking its hierarchy into its overcoming.

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<sup>55</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 85. (emphasis in original)

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions," afterword to *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Gabriel Rockhill, and Philip Watts, 273-88 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 280. (emphasis added)

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The difficulty then with a starkly a-philosophical reading of Rancière's politics, like Chambers', is that it privileges the harm of demystification over that of stultification as a harm almost in itself. In doing this, it muddles the specificity of Rancière's critique of Althusser by –somewhat ironically– bringing it more in line with the critique of 'determination in the last instance' advanced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe –philosophical and ontological post-Marxism *par excellence*.<sup>57</sup> And though Rancière would certainly be sympathetic to Laclau and Mouffe's critique of Althusser's economic monism, their reduction of Althusser to a flawed epistemology, presupposes a particular elimination of the thought/reality distinction which Rancière would find problematic, and which Chambers himself seeks to avoid. The transgression of Althusser's metapolitics is not so much then an essentializing incorrectness as it is a resigned and melancholic betrayal of its (revolutionary) politics; its satisfaction with an achievement of politics as philosophy.

This is of course not to say that Chambers misses the mark entirely. Far from this, his insistence on recognizing the presence of a tacit critical 'dispositif' in *Disagreement* I think is essential to understanding the structure of Rancière's surprising and impure politics. Here what Chambers suggests is that Rancière's critique of political philosophy is delivered by means of a particular and unacknowledged critical procedure that is itself a reconfiguration of the metapolitics it criticizes. Where one says "what you see as politics is really a falsehood masking the social truth," the other says "what we take for politics is really just police."<sup>58</sup> And while the two may be similar, Chambers claims that by positing a logic of equality, unintelligibility and disagreement, the later reconfigures metapolitics' process of inversion and in its place marshals a logic of reversal that relies on neither an appearance/essence or surface/depth dichotomy. Rancière's procedure is not about revealing a hidden essence; it is the confirmation of the essence's presence in the very space where it is denied. Chambers suggests that rather than a complete break with a metapolitical inversion, Rancière's method is a very specific kind of metapolitical inversion.

Inversion, Chambers maintains, is quite simply metapolitics as critical theory. It is demystification in the service of philosophical political/revolutionary ends.

As a system of demystification, critical theory works by way of the classic opposition between appearance and essence –that which appears on the surface is only falsehood masking the truth of the essential core. The task of the critical theorist is thus to

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<sup>57</sup> Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Verso, 2001), 97-100.

<sup>58</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 139.

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perform an operation of *inversion*, whereby the inner essence will be revealed as truth, and the outer appearance will be unmasked as falsehood.<sup>59</sup>

Against this type of metapolitical inversion Chambers posits that Rancière effects a reversal.

“Where inversion would insist on a hierarchical relationship of power, in which the terms to be inverted hold *normative* standing, a reversal does nothing more than disorganize the terms themselves –it scrambles their current orientation.”<sup>60</sup> Chambers speaks about the gap between the two in terms of sight and truth. Where the logic of inversion asserts that there is a hidden truth, a truth that is there but cannot be seen,<sup>61</sup> Rancière’s reversal asserts only the truth of the social orders’ fundamental contingency, the impossibility of founding a total community on its *arkhê*.<sup>62</sup> Rather than exposing politics’ truth, it is instead the experience of the truth *of* politics.<sup>63</sup> That is a truth that, while perhaps unintelligible, is always on the surface, never hidden. “Where metapolitics posits a natural/social truth that underlies political distortion, Rancière sees a contingent social order that thwarts all attempts to naturalize it.”<sup>64</sup>

Chambers, balancing a desire to remain true to Rancière’s polemic and anti-philosophical style with Rancière’s own desire not to forsake the sense of commitment demanded by critical theory,<sup>65</sup> concedes that any attempt at formulating a ‘Rancièrian critical dispositif’ must do some violence to Rancière’s thought, that it must be a paradox of some kind. He nevertheless offers three points along which such a dispositif could be conceived through a reconfiguring of the logic of inversion. These are: (1) the presupposition of equality, (2) a logic of unintelligibility, and (3) disagreement. (1) The presupposition of equality is a move from a normative equality to one based on assumption and verification. Equality here is not grounded in an inversion of false appearance but is instead, in keeping with Rancière’s pedagogy, a foolish or impossible assumption to be lived out.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, (2) a logic of unintelligibility is one that eschews the sightedness of critical theory. Here what Chambers suggests is that critical theory, in maintaining that there is a consistent yet hidden logic to marginalization and domination, includes the lot of the uncounted in the police order. Given that for Rancière the part of

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<sup>59</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 126. (emphasis in original)

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 140. (emphasis in original)

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>62</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 18.

<sup>63</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 140.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

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those who have no part only comes about through politics, Chambers maintains that *per* Rancière “the unintelligible is not *hidden* and for that reason unseeable; rather, the unintelligible is not there at all.”<sup>67</sup>

Against an imparting of sight, Chambers maintains that a Rancièrian *dispositif* “must produce a certain “awareness” of the part that has no part, but it does not unmask the *sans-part* or make it visible. *Only politics can do that.*”<sup>68</sup> This is not to say however that, according to Chambers, Rancière’s critique is *entirely* removed from politics, as (3) the insistence on disagreement demands that a Rancièrian *dispositif* facilitate the coming about of politics. His asterisks is that this politics must be one that is beyond sense-making, as the adoption of a logic of unintelligibility recognises “the idea that the task of thinking is to create knowledge as neither necessary to a critical *dispositif* nor adequate to democratic politics.”<sup>69</sup> Seemingly intent on maintaining a strict distance in his reading of Rancière between politics and police, Chambers effectively excludes Rancière’s critique from both his politics and his sense of philosophy.

Chambers, as I have alluded to, sets out his initial formulation of a Rancièrian *dispositif* with the utmost care not to mistreat Rancière’s understandings of politics and philosophy; here I would add that in many ways I think Chambers’ reading of Rancière is closest to one that Rancière himself might condone. And while there is no doubt a usefulness to this fidelity to Rancière, the balancing act required to retain this fidelity whilst insisting on Rancière being foremost a critic of demystification, leaves the status of his critical method somewhat ambiguous. In short, Chambers’ desire to keep Rancière out of any kind of philosophy while at the same time have his critique be distinct from his politics leaves Rancière’s critique in an unsatisfying limbo where it alone has the privilege of being neither philosophy nor politics, where it alone is allowed to have the sense of a structured politics and of an effective philosophy, without *being* necessarily identical to either.

It is at this point that the limits of reading Rancière foremost as a critic of demystification become apparent. If, as Chambers claims,<sup>70</sup> *Disagreement’s* critique of metapolitics both mobilizes and establishes its own critical method, why is it that Rancière’s politics and critique must be read as distinct and exclusive?<sup>71</sup> How can the idea of thinking be thought inadequate yet at the same time be seen as beneficial to bringing about disagreement and politics? Though Chambers allows that the unintelligible can never be eliminated and that the new intelligibility that politics creates is itself created from a

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<sup>67</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 153.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

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preceding unintelligibility, he nevertheless maintains, by insisting on the contingency of the social order, that Rancière's politics is neither mediated or a particular form of knowledge production. "The critical *dispositif* divides up and captures/constitutes reality. It does not operate by way of representation of reality, and for this reason it can escape the logic of mimesis that is the necessary basis for critique as inversion." The difficulty however with Chambers' reading is that this sense of –an aesthetic– capture/constitution that escapes the logic of mimesis is one that necessarily entails some form of mediation between the internal capture and the external constitution to operate.

Rather than seeing Rancière's reversal as a positing of the unintelligible in place of the hidden, I would suggest it be read more as a positing of capacity in the place of an attributed incapacity, a reversal of education into politics that simply assumes the unreasonable assumption of the capacity of the incapable and in this way offers the initial contours a new possibility that is the suspension of the hierarchy imposed by Schiller's aesthetic education.

### **Rancière's Reconfigured Aesthetic Scene**

To say then that Rancière both delivers his critique and sets out his politics within a *reconfigured* aesthetic scene is to assume that a certain commitment is demanded by his politics. Rather than being a dedicated critique of either Marx or Marxism's metapolitics, Rancière's reversal can, I maintain, be seen as an engagement with the aesthetic revolution and as a reconfiguration of Schiller's original scene, one that suspends its particular allotment of capacities all the while co-opting the emancipatory potential of its mode of experience, the actualizing potential of its play. In this way, his polemic would not only be the *form* of his democratic politics, but it would also allow him to retain in this politics a noticeable commitment to a politics of the left without at the same time having it reproduce the class hierarchy involved in bringing about a revolutionary consciousness understood in terms of an active-determinability.

As Alison Ross, Gabriel Rockhill and Slavoj Žižek have all variously suggested, Rancière does not break with the aesthetic regime as much as mobilize an altered version of it as something of a correction to Marxist metapolitics. For Ross, "the story's promise of aesthetic efficacy is the pivot of [Rancière's] conception of politics, which turns on the possibility not of a mere redistribution of the sensible, but a redistribution that has the political force to alter social perceptions, possibly at fundamental levels."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Alison Ross, "Equality in the Romantic Art Form: The Hegelian Background to Jacques Rancière's 'Aesthetic Revolution'," in *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality*, ed. by Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross, 87-98, (London: Continuum, 2012), 97-8.

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Here Rancière's politics has the impact that it does not because the homonymy of wrong and community constitutes a wrong in and of itself, but because this inescapable gap has a place in a story of sorts where its current stasis is derided and the possibility of change is sought after. And while I would disagree with Ross' assertion that this pivot gains its force from *merely* its plot function instead of some sense of material-history embedded within the fabric of the common sensible, I would nevertheless agree with her that Rancière's politics is animated by more than mere paradox.

As Gabriel Rockhill suggests, in critique Rancière generally does not so much disprove and discard, as disproves and co-opt.<sup>73</sup> It is this aspect of co-option that proves challenging for those who would paint Rancière in more deconstructionist terms, as it places his politics beyond the moment of disapproval and into a distribution of the sensible that has its own sense in its own history. If Žižek is able to suggest that found in Rancière is "the assertion of the aesthetic dimension as *inherent* in any radical emancipatory politics,"<sup>74</sup> it is because of the particular relationship between autonomy and heteronomy allowed by play in the aesthetic regime and by the simultaneous proximity and distance this play allows in critique.

While Rancière is no doubt critical of the ontological aesthetic model presented in Schiller's original aesthetic scene, I would nevertheless maintain that his critique of this original scene amounts more to a critique of a failed promise, than it does the critique of a wholly foolhardy illusion. Though clearly for Rancière neither the progression of humankind from a priority of sense, to form, to play nor a naturalization of aesthetic capacity is tenable, I do not think that in critiquing these he means to do away with the aesthetic regime entirely. However much the capacity promised by Schiller in his letters might be illusory, there remains an unsurpassable promise to his aesthetic state that Rancière is keen to untie from its original scene.

Politics and art exist only through definite regimes of identification. It is not "art" that frames, on its own, the "disinterested" look that is borrowed by [the joiner]. The politics that endows him with a new gaze is not the outcome of the commitment of artists and writers. It is the aesthetic regime of art that defines a new distribution of the spaces of experience and of the sensory equipment that fits the topography of those spaces. If the joiner can borrow this gaze, it is not due to revolutionary painting, whether it be revolutionary in the sense of David or in the sense of Delacroix. *What enables him to appropriate this aesthetic look is not so much a revolution in the subject or procedures of painting as it is the new kind of equality –or indifference– which makes them available to*

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<sup>73</sup> Gabriel Rockhill, "The Politics of Aesthetic: Political History and the Hermeneutics of Art," 197.

<sup>74</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Lesson of Rancière," afterword to *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, by Jacques Rancière, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill, (London: Continuum, 2004), 76.

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*anybody* and offers to the same look and the same pleasure the Roman heroes of liberty, the dishes of Dutch kitchens, or the characters of the Old Testament.<sup>75</sup> Rancière's politics is an altered romantic aesthetic experience. It is a borrowing of romanticism's gaze, which once freed from its limiting attribution of capacity by the foolish assumption of equality, moves the aesthetic regime's identity of opposites –its experience of (the failure of) form itself– from its isolation within the community of art and artistic form and allows its paradoxical autonomy, its play, to become the more general –if admittedly rare–<sup>76</sup> experience of politics.

Rancière maintains that the folly of the aesthetic revolution was to think that art's autonomy could, through *education*, become itself the autonomy of all mankind. It was to think humankind needed to be trained –to have things *explained*– in order to wield the active determinability necessary for life in a free political community.<sup>77</sup> For Rancière, rather than being exclusively the capacity of the artistically capable, the aesthetic experience –as the experience of a heteronomous autonomy– is a general mode of experience; it is the experience of an ability to split up the tautology of being capable all the while being in a position of supposed incapacity. It is the experience of the capacity of the incapable, of an autonomy that is nevertheless marked by a heteronomy, of the part of those who have no part, of politics in short.

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<sup>75</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions," 283. (emphasis added)

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill, (London: Continuum, 2004), 27.

## 2. HISTORY, THE MATERIAL AND THE SENSIBLE



Figure 1 Procession of the Russian Imperial Family<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "A Kingdom of Shadows, First Letter," *The Last Bolshevik (Le tombeau d'Alexandre)*, directed by Chris Marker, (Paris: Les Filmes de l'astrophore, 1993), DVD.

## Chapter 2 - History, the Material and the Sensible

The equality of all before the light and the inequality of the little people as the great pass by are both written on the same photographic plate.<sup>1</sup>

-Jacques Rancière

If Rancière calls for a new topography of the possible,<sup>2</sup> it is one that is itself made possible by his particularly *polemic* understanding of politics. With Rancière politics becomes a conflict over the existence of a common stage.<sup>3</sup> What is typically seen as the politics of a liberal-democracy, the play of actors vying for and parcelling out set normative-institutional powers, is set by Rancière within the realm of the police rather than in that of politics. Instead of being a game of legitimacies and powers, politics is seen as the polemic experience of the short-comings of the police logic it opposes. Politics is the experience of the contradiction posed by the part of those who have no part, by the sudden sensibility of those who obviously (already) existed, but whose appearance was not previously acknowledged by the apparently all-inclusive police count.<sup>4</sup>

Typically the anti-philosophical sense of Rancière's politics is set-out in terms of his refusal to participate in, or articulate his thought as, a systematized or pure conception of politics.<sup>5</sup> As Samuel Chambers puts succinctly, with Rancière "politics *is* not; politics disrupts."<sup>6</sup> Rather than being an ontological something, politics is the very disruption of being. Here a particular action cannot be said to be political, as this would require politics to be a stable category. It would require politics to be what for Rancière, is politics' opposite –philosophy. Instead, Rancière's "politics makes a supplement possible in the face of a social order that says it has no supplement."<sup>7</sup> Politics is the disruption of philosophy's attempt to fix or establish categories, via the experience of their failure as a total distribution of the sensible. It is the experience of totality as tautology. For Chambers, any attempt to moor Rancière's free-floating conception of politics by systematizing the relationship between politics and police denies Rancièrean politics' scandal, surprise, and impurity. Chambers thus gives to Rancière's politics a sense of

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, trans. by Julie Rose, (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott, (London: Verso, 2011), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*, trans. by Julie Rose, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 26-7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-2.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Chambers, "Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics," *European Journal of Political Theory* 10 (2011): 303-26.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 38. (emphasis added)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

disidentification, a disruption of the obviousness of the police order. And while he describes the resistance, failure and defiance that is inherent to this disidentifying and disrupting as being ‘anti-ontological’ (because it is said to deny that politics *is* something), the particular effect of Chambers’ reading, which largely sets aside Rancière’s ‘politics of aesthetics’, seems at times closer to a clean anti-ontological refusal (a politics that simply does not recognize and engage in ontology) than it does to the properly anti-ontological and polemic politics Chambers claims is at the heart of Rancière’s work.

To retain the polemic force of Rancière’s thought without making recourse to a philosophical realm of pure politics, it is essential to plumb the *aesthetic* character of his politics.<sup>8</sup> If Rancière’s politics is disidentifying, it is in the sense of it being the *aestheticized* experience of a philosophical-police wrong as a *sensible* wrong. His politics lies in the experience of an autonomous something – a free appearance, noise, gesture – that disrupts and reconfigures the heteronomous order of understanding by being at once a wrong proper to the police order – a wrong that has a definite meaning to the police count – while also being external to that very order’s apparently total distribution of allotments and capacities. Politics here is anti-philosophical, not in the sense of it being completely removed or apart from a philosophical/ontological police count, but in the sense of it being only partly removed from that police count. Politics is after all a *reconfiguration* of the sensible. In the same way as in the ‘aesthetic regime of art’ (aesthetic regime), where an object is only an aesthetic object in as much as it is not only art,<sup>9</sup> in Rancière’s politics the wrong of the police count is only politics in as much as it is not only a philosophical wrong.

While Chambers is no doubt correct in resisting those readings of Rancière that would confine the action of his politics to a *proper* or *specific* space, to a pure public political realm, care needs to be taken not to extend this into a reading that denies politics *a* space entirely.<sup>10</sup> If politics, as the disruption of the police count and a reconfiguration of the sensible, does not need to be moored to a third mediating term, it is because politics is always the disruption of a given, of a particular distribution of the sensible.<sup>11</sup> The sense in which Rancière’s politics might be said to be ‘free-floating’ then is

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<sup>8</sup> The aesthetic here is the strictly aesthetic, what Rancière refers to as the primary aesthetics at the core of politics. That is, the experience of the ‘and’ that binds the heteronomy of form to the autonomy of appearance. Refer to Chapter 1 or see: Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill, (London: Continuum, 2004), 12-3.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. by Steven Corcoran, (London: Continuum, 2010), 116-7.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 57.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 29-30.

fundamentally aesthetic; it is the experience of an autonomy –the polemic equality of subjectification– which is nevertheless marked by a heteronomy –the police order it *reconfigures*.<sup>12</sup>

The polemic that is not only the force of Rancière’s style,<sup>13</sup> but of his thought, would seem to involve some form of, dialectical-materialistic thinking. The ‘anti-ontological’, or more aptly aesthetic, play of heteronomy and autonomy, of knowable form and free appearance, of police and equality, gives his politics a polemic force that is *set within* the mediating sensorium of a common sensible; that is, a force that is both *involved in* and *apart from* the police order it *reconfigures*. While it would certainly be an overreach to suggest that in Rancière *qua* Rancière there is a clear and definite dialectical-materialistic politics, it is difficult to discount a territorialized Arendtian reading of Rancière –one that gives politics a proper space– without relying on some form of history or dialectic mediation to animate his polemic, to set it apart from a simple sense of contrarianism, and to gain a sense of its stakes.

What is it then about Rancière’s reversal, his move from the aesthetic state to a common sensorium, that can be said to be in any way dialectical-materialistic? Here I think it is important to return to the *disidentifying* sense of Rancière’s politics. If his politics –in bringing about an impossible capacity– is able to disrupt the categories of the police ontology by marking its total distribution of the sensible as a failure in its own terms, it is because politics has in some way seized on the knot that ties this (impossible) capacity to the police (mis)count. It is because politics has broken the tautology of being-*there* and opened up the experience of police totality as one of police tautology. It has opened up the experience of police *itself*. Rancière’s politics has taken on a disidentifying sense by refusing to be yet another plot where the power of active-form promises humankind emancipation from its material condition. For Rancière, politics and its subjectification forces identities out of the obviousness they hold for the police order; the question, which leads to Rancière’s tacit dialectical-materialism, is how they succeed in doing so.

The key to appreciating Rancière’s particular place in dialectical-materialistic thinking, I would suggest, is in understanding how exactly it is that subjectification brings about a certain *displacement*. A displacement that allows for the failure of the police count to be experienced as the failure of active-form. More than this, it is to understand how this displacement, that marks the failure of active form, achieves the efficacy that Rancière claims eludes Marxist and romantic metapolitics. It is to understand the wrong of subjectification as an aestheticized wrong, a wrong which through a tacit and limited

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<sup>12</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 123-4.

material-history, is nevertheless able to carry Rancière's sense of commitment through what for him should be a content-less and unknowable free-appearance.

This said, Rancière is quite clear on how it is that the wrong of politics comes about in subjectification. As the homonymy of itself and the community it finds itself in, wrong comes about through the identification of the part of those who have not part with the name of community, through the identification of surplus in an order that would deny the existence of any such surplus. Wrong comes about where it is undeniable that there is something between the parties in a conflict, where the coincidence of two worlds in one makes obvious their shared place in a common sensible, in a shared space that ties together the worlds of equality and inequality. What Rancière is less clear about, and what it is I would like to address in this chapter is the question of how his treatment of the wrong is distinct from his treatment of the wrong by metapolitics and how this figures into his sense of history.

### **“We Are All German Jews”**

In the final chapter of *Disagreement*, Rancière asserts that politics, and its necessary subjectification, is an art of warped deductions and mixed identities, an always *local* and *singular* construction of *universalities*.<sup>14</sup> Against the “restorers” who would see in globalization the opportunity to reassert politics' principle, to seize on the promise of identity and consensus logics to bring about a more radical and universal experience of politics, he insists on the locality of politics' universality. Contemporary globalization, far from being a reign of the universal, is characterized according to Rancière by the disappearance of the places appropriate to this type of rationale.<sup>15</sup> However much globalization as a world police brings about the expectation of a universal world politics, it is a politics that can never be, because no matter the size or scale of the community, politics is always the mobilization of a universality that defies this very size, that defies the totality of any community no matter how global in scale. For Rancière, globalization and its constituent humanitarianism, far from heralding a renewal of a pure or unified politics, is instead characterized by an elimination of the capacity for a polemic particularization of universalities.

The age of the “humanitarian” is one of immediate identity between the ordinary example of suffering humanity and the plenitude of the subject of humanity and of its rights. The eligible party pure and simple is then none other than the wordless victim, the ultimate figure of the one excluded from the logos, armed only with a voice

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 139.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

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expressing a monotonous moan, the moan of naked suffering, which saturation has made inaudible.<sup>16</sup>

It is here, amidst his discussion of the contemporary reign of humanitarianism and the double aporia of its realism, that Rancière locates what is perhaps his clearest instance of politics in the laconic: “we are all German Jews.”<sup>17</sup> This disidentifying slogan of the general strike of May ’68, I think, captures almost exactly the polemic that is involved in Rancière’s politics.

The stigmatizing phrase of the enemy, keen to track down the intruder on the stage where the classes and *their* parties were counted, was taken at face value, then twisted around and turned into the open subjectification of the uncounted, a name that could not be confused with any real social group, with anyone’s actual particulars.<sup>18</sup>

The sense and stakes of this phrase and the politics it bears witness to can, I think, best be gauged through an understanding of the conflict it emerged from. That is, by establishing this phrase’s relation to those phrases of the enemy, the slogans of the Pétainists and *ancien combattants* that answered de Gaulle’s call for a defence of the Republic and a return to order with cries of “*la France aux français*” (France for the French), “*les ouvriers au boulot*” (workers to work), and “*Cohn-Bendit à Dachau*” (Cohn-Bendit to Dachau).<sup>19</sup> This said, despite this contextual sense there is nevertheless an important universal aspect to the phrase that needs to be considered along with any aspects of locality and particularity. Here then it is helpful to first establish how it is that for Rancière the wrong of politics entails a very particular understanding of universality from which it cannot truly be separated.

The wrong is most clearly explained by Rancière in *Disagreement*, where he describes it as “the mode of subjectification in which the assertion of equality takes its political shape.”<sup>20</sup> It is the very specific meeting of the police logic –that logic of distribution and legitimization which on the basis of an *arkhê* (origin) establishes an apparently *total* and *surplus-less* distribution of the sensible– and the egalitarian logic of equality –the equally unknowable quality of every appearance, noise and gesture along with the paradoxical capacity of the incapable– which together show the impossibility of founding a community on any myth of its *arkhê*. Simply put, “[the wrong] is the very impossibility of *arkhê*.”<sup>21</sup>

The key to understanding the wrong in this way is to recognise the disidentifying character given by Rancière to subjectification, which as a term should be distinguished from the sense given to it by Michel Foucault. Foucault’s subjectification entails the constitution and emergence of a subject within

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 126.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. (emphasis in original)

<sup>19</sup> Kristin Ross, *May ’68 and Its Afterlives*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 59.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 13.

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and as a result of effects of power.<sup>22</sup> For him subjectification is a historical particularity of modernity intended to mark the breadth of society's governing and regulating effects and to locate these effects beyond their typically understood place in specialized institutions and techniques. Rancière's subjectification is far more polemic. It is an assertion of the capacity of the incapable –of their equal capacity as speaking beings– and of the (mis)count of the part of those who have no part –the part of those who despite taking the name of the community, possess no place in it other than by virtue of being free like the rest.<sup>23</sup> By subjectification Rancière understands “the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the *reconfiguration* of the field of experience.”<sup>24</sup> The largest gap then between the subjectifications of Foucault and Rancière is where Rancière's establishes the subject of politics as a denied but always existent subject.

For Rancière, subjectification is not strictly speaking about the emergence or creation of the subject; instead, it is about the (ac)counting and recognition of subjects who obviously (already) existed, but whose appearance, place or capacity as such, was overlooked by the police and its *apparently* total or complete distribution. “A mode of subjectification does not create subjects *ex nihilo*; it creates them by transforming identities defined in the natural order of the allocation of functions and places into the instances of experience of a dispute.”<sup>25</sup> Subjectification then is not about either emergence or creation, because what is in dispute is not the existence of the subject but rather their part in the whole –whether they are said to count or not. When Rancière claims then that “there is politics –and not just domination– because there is a wrong count of the parts of the whole,”<sup>26</sup> he is making the stakes of his subjectification at once more particular than Foucault's, while at the very same time making them more universal; he is both exposing and marshaling a universality in the very particularity this universal would deny.

Subjectification for Foucault is based on the historical emergence of the subject as the result of the regularization of the relations within the practices and techniques of governance. His account of subjectification is tied to the disciplinary function of discourse, which itself derives its meaning from this

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<sup>22</sup> Colin Gordon, afterword to *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, by Michel Foucault, edited and trans. by Colin Gordon, 229-59, (New-York: Vintage, 1980).

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 35. (emphasis added)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

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very patterning and regularization.<sup>27</sup> With Rancière, however, the policing, through and against which, his subjectification is understood “is not so much the “disciplining” of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of *occupations* and properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed.”<sup>28</sup> The particularity of this rule is not bound to a modern biopolitics or to any historically specific sense of modernity as attitude,<sup>29</sup> instead it can happen anywhere and at any time. It is simply the logical opposite of politics,<sup>30</sup> the configuration of experience that politics through subjectification reconfigures.

To say then that the largest gap between Rancière’s subjectification and Foucault’s is the sense of reconfiguration tied to the former, is not to assert that one demands an effectiveness the other merely describes. It is, instead, to emphasize the very different place and status of the universal and particular in their thought. For Rancière,

the concept of the wrong is thus not linked to any theater of “victimization.” It belongs to the original structure of *all* politics. Wrong is simply the mode of subjectification in which the assertion of equality takes its political shape. Politics occurs by reason on a single universal that takes the specific shape of wrong. Wrong institutes a singular universal, a polemical universal, by tying the presentation of equality, as the part of those who have no part, to the conflict between parts of society.<sup>31</sup>

The universal here then has its place in that space in which every appearance, noise and gesture is equally unknowable, though it is only through its paradoxical bond with the particular sense carried by a particular conflict within this space that the universal has any universal status as such. If, for Rancière politics is made up in the relation between worlds rather than in power relations,<sup>32</sup> it is because of the particularly incommensurable status of the universal in his thought, which allows for an aesthetic play between the heteronomy of “the inegalitarian distribution of social bodies in a partition of the perceptible,” and the contentious autonomy of “the order of the equal capacity of speaking beings in general.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” trans. by C. Lazzeri, in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, 300-18, (New-York: The New Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 29. (emphasis in original)

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, 43-57, (New York: The New Press, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 31.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. (emphasis added)

<sup>32</sup> Rancière talks about this relationship between ‘two worlds in one’ in terms of a verification of equality, a contrast between the world as per the police order and the world where the part of those with no part is emphasised. For example, in the case of the Aventine Secession (discussed below) he talks about the relationship between a world where the ‘plebs’ are not seen, where the plebs do not ‘exist’ and a world where they do exist, where they are seen, heard. See: Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

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In a first sense, then, the wrong that underlies the statement “we are all German Jews” is identical to that which Rancière sets out in the case of the Aventine Secession. In the traditional account, given by Titus Livius, the Aventine Succession is simply a peasant revolt, a knee-jerk reaction to the poverty and hardship endured by the plebs and nothing more. Here

The position of the intransigent patricians is straightforward: there is no place for discussion with the plebs for the simple reason that plebs do not speak. They do not speak because they are beings without a name, deprived of *logos* –meaning symbolic enrolment in the city. Plebs live a purely individual life that passes on nothing to posterity except for life itself, reduced to its reproductive function.<sup>34</sup>

Contrary then to the traditional reading, Rancière –drawing from the works of 19<sup>th</sup> Century essayist Pierre-Simon Ballanche– claims that much more is at play on the Aventine than Titus Livius is willing to acknowledge. Far from being a monotonous moan, the conflict played out between the patricians and the plebs is a conflict over the very existence of a common stage, over the equal capacity for speech, over their equal capacity for reconfiguration, and for making their own account.

Faced with the intransigence of the patrician class the plebs of the Aventine did not take up arms and revolt, instead they established their own community, they established their own distribution of the sensible and hence marked *themselves* “as speaking beings sharing the same properties as those who deny them these.”<sup>35</sup> More than an instance of a politics of recognition, whereby the plebs would be asserting their equal place in the public, the Aventine conflict is a splitting up of the double sense of *logos*, that is, of its sense as speech –or communication– and as account –the meaningful arrangement of actions and images in a telling of history.<sup>36</sup> “To find out if plebs can speak is to find out if there is anything “between” the parties.”<sup>37</sup> The conflict then is not about the equal place of patrician and plebe on a given stage –about the place of politics and the plebs in the public– but rather is about the very *existence* of this stage. For Rancière,

Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world: the world where they are and the world where they are not, the world where there is something “between” them and those who do not acknowledge them as speaking beings who count and the world where there is nothing.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

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On the Aventine there is then a community that has its sense in both the whole and in its complete division into parts and parties, and then there is another part of those who have no part, a supplementary part of those whose occupation includes them in the whole but only as an empty party, a non-party that lacks any positive qualification. This is that party of those who are quite simply “free like the rest.”<sup>39</sup>

Homonymy then is this first sense of the wrong, the mobilizing of the gap between names and things in such a way as to have one part by virtue of its lack of qualification contentiously identify itself with the whole of the very community in which it has no part. This is the short-circuit which Rancière maintains makes politics ineradicable, the homonymy of *wrong* and *community*. In this sense the “we” enacted by the students in ’68 is an *open* subjectification because it consciously takes on this homonymic and supplementary character. It is, as Kristin Ross suggests, a means of refusing a certain identification of self, and of refusing it in such a way as to no longer be sociologically classifiable.<sup>40</sup> Ross maintains that since the October 17 massacre six years earlier in 1961, the student movement had not been a mobilization around students’ issues but had instead been about the introduction of a disparity into what it meant to be a student and to be French. The experience of the cover-up of the massacre, and of the attempt to dictate what it was that was visible and sayable as well as what it was that was to be invisible and unsayable, had produced a dislocation in what it meant to be French. The “we” of the students in ’68 relives then in some ways the “we” of “*ici on noie les Algériens*” (here we drown Algerians) both in terms of a making visible what by official accounts should be invisible and of a polemic identification with the very community in which this appearance has no place.

But, however much the declassifying sense of the “we” might be the vehicle of this open subjectification, it is not uniquely this homonymy of wrong and community that carries this declassifying effect. Homonymy is not in itself polemic. Where its polemic quality comes about is when the space that it opens up is one that is a surplus to the established and total count of the community’s parts, when it is an undeniable and yet denied space. So in this sense, yes, the wrong is the universal impossibility of the *arkhê*, but it is also an always locally derived universal, a situated universality. Both the “we” of ’68 and the declassification it entails cannot be read away from the subsequent “... are all German Jews.” The undeniable force with which the slogan now hits the reader some 50 years removed cannot be understood apart from the time and place where the calling forth of the unrepresentable horror of the camps was not met on the streets with charges of unacceptable equivalence, but with flippant calls to

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<sup>39</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 8. (emphasis in original)

<sup>40</sup> Kristin Ross, *May ’68 and Its Afterlives*, 57.

genocide. If this “we” is able to declassify with the force that it does, it is because its force is not strictly bound to either the sentence or even the context of ’68, but to a wider sense of its history and of the historicity carried by the doubled life of all perceptual objects, by their place in a common sensible shared by politics and the distribution that politics *reconfigures*.

### **The Politics of History**

Of course to talk about the place of history in the work of Rancière is not easy.<sup>41</sup> While it has often featured, even prominently, in his writing, he has only very recently taken up the question of the status of history itself. Prior to the publication of *Figures of History* in 2014 (*Figures de l’histoire*, 2012)<sup>42</sup> it would have been difficult to make the claim that history had a definite place in his thought and politics. Up until then history was usually either something like an illustrative device –in the sense of providing an earlier scene for the development of his sense of politics– or it was some foolhardy sense of teleology that was applied by others to the movement of society through time. In Rancière’s writing, history has typically been something of an enigmatic and tacit signifier, something to bolster his thought when needed but that is otherwise set aside. Rancière briefly touches on the relationship between history and historicity, as well as on the problematic distinction between fictional and historical-social reality in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, saying there that “the ‘logic of stories’ and the ability to act as historical agents go together.”<sup>43</sup> However the particular status of history is not addressed. There it is left, through negation, at being neither a rational Aristotelian history, nor a science of history.<sup>44</sup>

What then exactly is Rancière’s sense of history, where does it figure in his thought, and how is it involved in the disidentifying experience of politics? If subjectification is brought about by marking the place of the part of those who have no part in the community, by the emphasising of the homonymy of wrong and community, how or where does history fit in? In the second half of *Figures of History* Rancière sets out four ways of understanding the term. Here, in a rather genealogical fashion, he maintains that history can have the sense of either: an anthology of examples; a story playing in the junction and disjunction of example and history; a moving and fate-dealing mode of time; or finally, it can denote the very fabric of the common sensible. And while the first three do figure quite prominently

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<sup>41</sup> As Samuel Chambers rightly notes, Rancière’s thought, because of its polemic character, often seems to be rooted in nothing. See: Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 21-5.

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Figures de l’histoire*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill, (London: Continuum, 2004), 39.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

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in what can be cast as Rancière's own sense and development of history ultimately it is in the last sense of history, as fabric, that his democratic politics has its place, that it finds meaning.

The first sense of history, as anthology, is a great figures' history in a memorial and exemplary sense. Here each great figure teaches their own lesson, "unchanging over time, and intended only for those whose vocation it was to leave behind a memory of their actions," and who are then to "accordingly draw an example from the memorable deeds of other men worthy of being remembered."<sup>45</sup> What is important to note is the *immediate* quality of this sense of history. Unlike the second sense, which also figures in the plot of great names and events, history as anthology is both without time and without a sense of being tied to a past world of signs. Instead, it is a history that would gesture –to those with the capacity to contemplate such things– at ways of occupying the world.<sup>46</sup>

In its second sense, as either story or as fable, the term carries a certain historical awareness, a historicity of sorts. This historicity comes from the play of example and history, from the simultaneous junction and disjunction of both the narrative account of causes and events, and the poetic function of the meaningful arrangement of actions and images in a recounting of history.<sup>47</sup> If then in its first sense history is an immediate collection of timeless examples, in its second, it is the placing of these examples in past moments. "Ever since Polybius and Titus Livius, the narrative account of events has *also* been constituted as a presentation of the necessary and the exemplary."<sup>48</sup> In this way history as story telling is closely tied to the 'representative regime of art' (representative regime). However much history as fable might take its sense from the play of junction and disjunction, it is not a *free* play in the aesthetic sense. Instead, it is a play bound to a hierarchy of appropriate styles and forms.<sup>49</sup> It is an edifice in which subjects, figures and scenes are matched to a style of equal and appropriate weight and dignity.

It is only then in the third sense of history, as a historical power, that the 'new history', the history of our historical age comes to figure, at least explicitly,<sup>50</sup> in Rancière's thought and account. This history is bound to a reversal of the rules of representation that define history as storytelling. "The distinctive feature of this form of history is that none of its scenes or figures is ever equal to it."<sup>51</sup> Rather than being either immediately or hierarchically organized, history in this sense is the ontological power

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<sup>45</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, 11-2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-5.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 63. (emphasis added)

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>50</sup> Much as with his treatment of the non-aesthetic regimes of art, the ethical regime of images and the representative regime, Rancière's first two sense of history are set out from the perspective of the 'new history'.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, 67.

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that plots all prior history into a movement towards a necessary end and that sets all relations into in a teleological unfolding of History, into a unified historical process. Here history is no longer an anthology of examples; instead it is the very power that steals bodies, sweeping them from the virtuous uses of story and example, and setting them in the service of a collective destiny.<sup>52</sup>

Now in much the same way as with the aesthetic regime (in *The Politics of Aesthetics*) and metapolitics (in *Disagreement*), Rancière doubles this third sense of history in coming to his own final sense. This third sense of history is at once the foremost object of Rancière's criticism, while also being the very means by which this criticism has any sense. To invoke a Rancièrian turn of phrase, the final history finds itself as something of a *politics* of history, a *reconfiguration* and *reversal* of the third sense's assumptions of capacity and incapacity by means of the impossible assumption of equality. The error Rancière maintains is made in understanding history *uniquely* as historical power is the assumption that the reversal of the representational need be the 'unrepresentable',<sup>53</sup> that the death of the great figure need be the death of all individuality, and that the negation of a grand anthological history need necessarily be of an equally great and epic scale.<sup>54</sup>

[The third history] attest to itself in the analogy shaped from it by its insubstantial characters, who seem to arise from the lines and brush strokes and the pictorial material, ready to be swept up again by the power that pulled them out of the chaos of coloured materials. In any coloured mass, there is from now on a virtual body and a sense of history.<sup>55</sup>

For Rancière the coloured mass might well become Hemingway in the Sierra de Guadarrama, or the prisoners walking from Robben Island, but it could equally become a crumpled transfer, a bailiff effecting a foreclosure, or the ominous hum of a predator drone. "Historical time is not just the time of great collective destinies. It is the time where anyone and anything at all make history and bear witness to history."<sup>56</sup> Rancière talks about the fourth sense of history, then, as the one where the figures of the genre painting –the representative regime's form for the little people–<sup>57</sup> invade the space of heroes, claiming that there it is clear that "history is that time in which those who have no right to occupy the same place can occupy the same image."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, 67-8.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-9.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

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Here then the sense of history as the fabric of the common sensible cannot be taken completely apart from a sense of history as fate-dealing power. This is because in a first place, as a reconfiguration of the former's sense is dependent on that of the later, and in a second, to deny the necessity of the stakes being set to the scale of collective destiny is not to deny collective destiny altogether. However, as much as Rancière might stress that our current "age of history" can be defined through the proliferation and interplay of the senses of history, and not uniquely from some movement from catastrophe to rarefaction and aphasia,<sup>59</sup> there nevertheless remains in his final sense a mediated and fate-dealing historicity on the part of the object. However much everything might make history, the doubling that makes this possible also sets all objects in history.

It is because, in the age of history, every object leads a double life, holds a potential for historicity that is at the very heart of its nature as an ordinary perceptual object. History as the sensible fabric of things is doubled by history as fate-dealing power. Freeing history-as-example and (hi)story-as-composition from their subjection to representation, it multiplies the figurative possibilities which all forms of de-figuration then enjoy.<sup>60</sup>

Everything and everyone for Rancière both makes and is made by history. For the historicization of art, this makes the two previously exclusive fates of art –the completion of art *via* the transformation of all life into art, and the end of art through the self-elimination of its lie along with the lie of the society that produced it– not only 'copossible' but identical. The model of distinct historical agents and objects is no longer tenable once everything is set in a history that is itself understood by the proliferation of histories.

The completion and self-elimination of art go together because it is the very particularity of history as a fate-dealing power that, in [history], any existing form aims for a completion that is identical to its own elimination. And the age of History also confers upon all formless matter,<sup>61</sup> just as it does on all established writing, the possibility of being turned into an element in the play of forms. The age of the anti-representation is not the age of the unrepresentable. It is the age of high realism.<sup>62</sup> Realism here not in the banal sense of a priority of actual things but in the sense of a refusal of *mimesis* (imitation), in the sense of a destruction of the structures and hierarchies through and within which actual things have their sense by means of a direct inscription of this sense into their reality. Of course it is a *high* realism because this direct inscription also imbeds into reality the very artificialism understanding and form require. Objects in this high realist history each contain something of a monadic

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<sup>59</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, 79.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-1.

<sup>61</sup> That is to say all life in the sense of Schiller's aesthetics, and all appearance in Rancière's.

<sup>62</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, 81.

potential. Products of a distribution, of a history, they each contain within themselves the very exterior through which they have their sense.

History in Rancière's final sense is one that makes possible the simultaneous experience of the ordinary and the extraordinary. The sense of this can be taken from an initial scene of Chris Marker's *The Last Bolshevik* (see: Figure 1). Here in the grainy footage of a procession of the Russian imperial family history is experienced as the shared ordinary and extraordinary quality of the images flickering before us. Rancière suggests that this particular quality is difficult to gauge in a time where the *zeitgeist* demands that the task of the historian to *do history* be fervently separated from any sense of history as "the ideological mirage according to which mankind or the masses would supposedly *make history*,"<sup>63</sup> but that the particular quality of these images owe to their status as a story in the time of history – where everything both makes and is already made by history.<sup>64</sup> Much as with Georg Lukács' account of the novel, Rancière's sense of the ordinary-extraordinary comes from something like "the paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which then is abolished over and over again."<sup>65</sup>

The extraordinary quality of the procession comes then from the overdetermined place of the history-makers taken in by the camera lens. Clearly, the very existence of the images owe to their place in a plot in which it is, and a time in which it was, common place to document the lives of the great, but the camera unwittingly does not frame this single story. What it captures is only what is already common, the material existence of a time where the distinction of belonging to the order of the memorable is obviated by the levelling action of the camera.<sup>66</sup> In a way then the doubled sense of Rancière's history is exactly this play of ordinary and extraordinary. It is to see history itself as the fabric that is simultaneously woven into 'history' in all its senses, but it is also itself the strange power of these histories in a time where everything, despite making history, is nevertheless made by history.

### History and the Wrong of Politics

How then does this sense of history help us understand the always local and singular construction of universality in Rancière's politics? How does the doubled life of ordinary objects feature in this construction, and what does this mean for our understanding of the wrong of politics? By

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<sup>63</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, 10. (emphasis in original)

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-3.

<sup>65</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. by Anna Bostock, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974), 84.

<sup>66</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, 12-5.

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suggesting that history is the very fabric of the sensible, Rancière seems to be allowing himself to move beyond a characterization of life as *uniquely* free appearance and is recognizing a certain historicity in the common sensible, a certain heteronomy that is carried by formless matter by virtue of its place in the age of history. By presenting something like a politics of history –a reconfiguration and reversal of fate-dealing history around the assumption of equality– Rancière is able to recast the *necessary* historicity of all objects as a *potential* historicity, and in this way is able to derive from them a particular historical meaning without at the same time reducing or disallowing the potential for other historicities to be carried by the same material. In this way Rancière’s understanding of appearance is able to escape being nothing more than an inert surface of inscription, without at the same time falling back into the trap of a structured historical determinism. History as a common ontological tenor is something that is played with and within, it is neither a purely heteronomous force nor is it merely a blank canvas.

It goes without saying that Rancière’s politics is ultimately a paradox, and as such it is perhaps not possible to locate in any clear way the place of history within it. In fact, given its impure character, it is likely that his politics can be tied to his history only through a general sense of their relation. This said, despite whatever difficulty there is in seizing the relationship between these two polemically constituted concepts, what the sense of history as the fabric of the common sensible suggests is that at least *per* Rancière, subjectification is in some ways a reconfiguration tied to history, a reconfiguration *of* and *in* history. While the circular play of making and being made by history opens up a distance in Rancière’s thought from any kind of unified historical process –there is of course with Rancière no determination in the last instance– it does not signal the complete ineffectiveness of any such form of history, nor does it its wholesale exclusion from his thought.

History, rather than being synonymous with either the local or the universal, seems to figure *in both*, as far as subjectification’s polemic construction of universalities is concerned. Rather than locating history in either the universal –as its fate-dealing sense would demand– or the local –as its radical equality would suggest– Rancière sets history as the stage and time where these each have their sense and effect their own historicity. In this way it is probably easier to reverse the statement and say that for Rancière, both the local and the universal figure *in* history. And while it would be an overreach from this to claim that this sense demands, in the manner of the Frankfurt school, that immanent critique always be mediated through a sense of social totality or History, it is nevertheless clear that the double life of objects involves a certain phantasmagoria, a mediated and fate-dealing historicity on the part of the object. Objects in history still carry a particular heteronomy and effect a particular historicity, they still come out of themselves and become life and world. If Rancière’s politics seem paradoxically to be

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grounded in nothing and yet retain a clear polemic force, it is because this phantasmagoric character has not been given enough weight in comparison to the endless play of figuration and de-figuration that the assumption of equality entails.

Addressing history in Rancière's work, Chambers suggests that it is the polemic, unexpected and always surprising character of his politics that removes it from a grounding in history. Where history does figure, for Chambers, is in locating the context that Rancière is writing from, a sense that tentatively links his conceptual work with the historical events of '68.<sup>67</sup> "Rancière always writes from somewhere, even if he writes in such a way as to mask his location. In using the archive *to produce polemic*,<sup>68</sup> Rancière once again takes a distinct approach to common categories and concepts."<sup>69</sup> Chambers, as discussed in the previous chapter, needs to keep Rancière's critique from his politics to maintain his own impure and a-philosophical reading of Rancière. However, if "when we turn to history, what we ultimately see in it are moments of politics,"<sup>70</sup> how is it that it is Rancière who is producing the polemic at hand, and what does this actually entail? Chambers might agree that it is not the polemic that reveals politics, as this would return politics and critique to the very metapolitical philosophy of demystification both he and Rancière are seeking to escape. But by leaving the very relationship between polemic and politics unexplored, and by approaching history as something that is done as opposed to also being made, Chambers' reading unnecessarily reduces Rancière's politics to an immediacy.

What the phantasmagoric aspect of Rancière's history provides is another dimension to the impurity of his politics. While Chambers is certainly correct to suggest that it is the boldness and suddenness of Rancière's claims and thought that gives his polemic a real force,<sup>71</sup> what needs to be questioned is *how* this force is felt. Here I would argue that part of what makes Rancière's polemic so surprising is that it is never entirely alien or unexpected. Admixed with impurity in Rancière's thinking is always a certain desire for purity, for totality, along with a sense of its very impossibility. In this way his thought is somewhat fragmentary. That locality which he mobilizes in his writing is always one that strives for the recognition of a universal it would subvert,<sup>72</sup> that seeks to satisfy in some way a concept

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<sup>67</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 24-5.

<sup>68</sup> In talking in terms of the archive Chambers is referring to Rancière's general use of historical account, but he is also referring to Rancière's particular use of the Workers Archive in *Proletarian Nights*. Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers Dream in Nineteenth Century France*, trans. by John Drury, (London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>69</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 25. (emphasis added)

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>72</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*, 26-7.

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that is always already compromised. There is then something of an ironic locality and smallness to Rancière's thought that always situates itself by means of a totality it marks as tautology, but a totality it in no way tries to seize.

To put it somewhat differently, while politics itself might well be ungrounded, its place in a grounded world grants it a lingering groundedness even if it is only one that comes about through reversal. Thinking through the displacement that is brought about by Rancière's subjectification, it is important to recognise that it is not only the history of '68 that is influencing this conceptualization,<sup>73</sup> but also the histories of whatever it is that is being reconfigured. While the wrong of politics, the homonymy of wrong and community, has a nearly universal status, it is never constituted, never staged, without a locality. The other side of impurity is that meaning, that sense of history that is carried by this locality.

To say then that there is a certain dialectical-materialism to Rancière's politics is not to claim that there is any kind of sublation at play. Rather it is to suggest that through the movement and reconfiguration brought about by the seemingly impossible assertion of equality –the positing of an *as if* that is different from the one that has already established things as they are– that there is still a *fragmentary* and lingering historical process that cannot be removed from either its place in that particular history which would deny this equality, or the general perspective from which the history of exploitation and inequality is understood. It is to note that the *if* of subjectification's *as if* both has its sense and takes its stakes through its conflict with that police logic that would maintain the world as *is*, with that police count which claims a monopoly of distribution. That dialectical-materialism in Rancière's politics then comes from this other side of impurity, from the presence of the *as if* in the *as is*, from the meaning it derives from its place in the historical fabric of the common sensible and the multiple historicities through which they have their sense.

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<sup>73</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 24-5.

### Chapter 3 - The Fragmentary Politics of Style

Whoever chooses philosophy as a profession today must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises began with: that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real. No justifying reason could rediscover itself in a reality whose order and form suppresses every claim to reason; only polemically does reason present itself to the knower as a total reality, while only in traces and ruins is it prepared to hope that it will ever come across correct and just reality.<sup>1</sup>

-Theodor W. Adorno

At first glance, there is not much to link Rancière's politics with Adorno's. Where it is that Adorno appears by name in Rancière's work, the emphasis is almost universally negative. Rancière's Adorno is emphatically resigned. A stalwart of the avant-garde and its illusory capacity, his "reduction of art to the ethical witnessing of unrepresentable catastrophe" fits almost seamlessly into the metapolitics of the aesthetic regime and into its tautological success in failure.<sup>2</sup> By perpetually re-enacting the inhumanity of the human and the humanity of the inhuman, Rancière's Adorno upholds the promise of a reconciled life only by its resignation to simulacrum, by means of its indefinite deferral.<sup>3</sup> In this Adorno finds himself quite clearly within Rancière's plot of 'the resistance of art'.<sup>4</sup> And yet despite his clear admonition of Adorno's complicity in this left-wing melancholy,<sup>5</sup> there is nevertheless a certain affinity in Rancière's work for perhaps the most resigned of the Frankfurt school's thinkers.

Much like Rancière, Adorno is a polemicist, a thinker whose thought is advanced by what he does not say and whose claims are carefully guarded in aphorism and paradox. Deeply sceptical of that systematic thought which would pretend to seize the object in its concept, Adorno's writings are fragmentary and essayistic, approaching their object through parataxis and dislocation. With Adorno much of the work in understanding his thought is in understanding his style and how it allows for an engagement with the non-identical that does not pay for this engagement through the loss of its object. In many ways, then, the task is to recover the movement of thought that through dislocation and polemic reveals the sense of his chiasmatic and aphoristic statements.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," *Telos* 31 (1977): 120.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. by Steven Corcoran, (London: Continuum, 2010), 201.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott, (London: Verso, 2011), 40.

<sup>6</sup> Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, (London: Verso, 2014), 11-26.

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Not surprisingly, given this shared polemic style, that affinity for Adorno's thought that might be read in Rancière's work is one that is itself guarded in reconfiguration and reversal. To locate it then, it might be helpful to adopt the perspective of a common struggle against the logic of inversion,<sup>7</sup> against the positive negation of negation.<sup>8</sup> Adorno, like Rancière, is an anti-systemic thinker. To those who saw the critical gesture as culminating in a praxis that was simply the inversion of idealism, he accented in their critique and praxis the return of a strange and unbearable familiarity. Against this he maintains that "knowledge can only widen horizons by abiding so insistently with the particular that its isolation is dispelled."<sup>9</sup> Like Rancière, there is in Adorno an insistence on the priority of the local and particular, but a particularity and locality that are themselves irrevocably tied to the universal and the total. Simple inversion, the revealing of an inner truth of the exposing the falsehood of appearance,<sup>10</sup> is inadequate for critique as it assumes that there is a static truth that would survive inversion unchanged. With Adorno, as with Rancière,<sup>11</sup> there is "no "real world" behind the veil of appearance, no fixed meaning to be exposed."<sup>12</sup> "Appearance and reality are not opposed," as "a reality always goes along with an appearance."<sup>13</sup> In this, reification is much like the distribution of the sensible in that it is not only inevitable, but is also the very condition through which anything *is* anywhere.

But of course, there is much to separate Adorno's reification from Rancière's distribution of the sensible. Not least that reification in Adorno's writing is often understood to entail a sense of mediation through the totality of society in which the phantasmagoric character of the commodity and exchange value seem to always have the upper hand.<sup>14</sup> Adorno's thought, for all its scepticism of historical determinism, never quite seems able to shed its roots in historical process.<sup>15</sup> As Martin Jay suggests, the sense of totality invoked by Adorno and used to inform his understanding of reification cannot easily be separated from the freight of associations it had already accumulated with Lukács and Benjamin.<sup>16</sup> Though Adorno might well have "irrevocably demolished the *foundations* of Western Marxism's initial

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<sup>7</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 191.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism & Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 261.

<sup>9</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott, (London: Verso, 2005), 74.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 126.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 141

<sup>12</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism & Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, 256.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions," in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, edited by Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts, 273-288, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 280.

<sup>14</sup> Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, 60.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Reappraisals: Shifting Alignment's in Postwar Critical Theory*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 96-8.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism & Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, 265.

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concepts of totality” and removed the ability of its totalizing epistemology to be “invoked with confidence against the antinomies of bourgeois thought,”<sup>17</sup> his own thought nevertheless retains a strong sense of commitment that is rooted in this very totality.

It is in this somewhat paradoxical commitment and its uneasy relation to totality that a comparison with Rancière becomes quite interesting. As I have suggested in chapter one, Rancière’s politics is itself not without a sense of strategy or commitment. In reversing education into politics and in offering the initial contours of a suspension of the hierarchies carried on in aesthetic education and the aesthetic revolution, Rancière does not part company with those who insist on the reality of reality, misery and wars. Instead his critique of left-wing melancholy is one of its stultification and illusory capacity, of its lack of efficacy.<sup>18</sup> The folly of the aesthetic revolution for him is to think that it is only through traditional aesthetic education that art’s autonomy can become the autonomy of all humankind, to assume that aesthetic experience is a learned experience and that it is not already the experience of politics in his democratic sense.

Much as with Adorno, there is a general uneasiness surrounding the stakes of Rancière’s politics. While it is certainly correct to speak of the truth of his politics in terms of a truth *of* politics,<sup>19</sup> that is in terms of the homonymy of wrong and community, this homonymy alone cannot account for the stakes of politics. Because politics for Rancière is always added to an already present conflict between the parts of society, the stakes of this conflict despite being brought forward as homonymy and paradox always exceed this particular logical short-circuit. And while the stakes of politics are in this way taken from the conflict to which the presentation of equality has been tied,<sup>20</sup> if it equality alone that is the animator of Rancière’s politics how is it that those rare instances of politics that Rancière does identify always seem to be ones that are in keeping with a left-wing position? Rancière never seems to locate the part of those who have no part in conflicts where it would support populism or nationalism. Instead he variously sees politics in the general strike of ’68,<sup>21</sup> in women’s rights in the first republic,<sup>22</sup> in the succession of the plebs on the Aventine,<sup>23</sup> and in the writings of 19<sup>th</sup> Century workers,<sup>24</sup> among others. Without a broader sense of history how is this commitment to be understood?

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<sup>17</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism & Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, 274. (emphasis added)

<sup>18</sup> See: “Reversing Education into Politics” from chapter 1.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 140.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*, trans. by Julie Rose, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 39.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-42.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-7.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Rancière, “The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions,” 273-5.

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Here, as I have noted in chapter two, it is important to consider the historical character of the common sensible and of the double life of the objects that find themselves in it. With Rancière there is no one history, and certainly no History in the universal sense. Instead, the age of history in which we find ourselves is defined by a proliferation of the *senses* of history and of the figurations and de-figurations that they allow. In this way history is a space where both the great and the small can figure in the same image; it is a common ontological tenor that provides the stage for the conflictual staging of worlds. At the same time however, this history as the proliferation of histories is not without its own sense of historicity. While everyone and everything makes history for Rancière, this making is always doubled by the fact that whoever and whatever *makes* history was always and already first made *by* history.

While the disagreement, disidentification and dissensus of politics might arise in a *moment* in an ontological sense,<sup>25</sup> this same disagreement, disidentification and dissensus which establish politics are not themselves immediate, either in the sense of being without time or without mediation. As such, politics itself is partly historical. It is historical in a local and particular sense because of the fate-dealing historicity carried by the common sensible, but it is also historical in a somewhat universal sense because its polemic situates politics by means of the very totality and count, it seeks to mark as tautology, as miscount. The stakes of Rancière's politics are, then, always at once local and universal, because the practice of the *as if* is a splitting up not only of the tautology of being, but of being-*there*. Politics for Rancière is a disruption of the police order as both a count *and* a distribution of the sensible. Rather than being the exposure of a universal tautology by means of a local particularity, politics is the experience of a single tautology that can be approached in either a universal and local sense.

This said, my aim in this chapter, drawing on Rancière's critique of metapolitics, is to focus on Rancière's fragmentary style and to see if in the senses of commitment and history in his writing there is something that might be likened to Adorno's negative dialectic. Here what I wish to suggest is that Rancière, in setting about subjectification as the mobilization of an *as if* that disrupts the *as is* posited by the police order, relieves the position towards totality set out by Adorno in his negative dialectic. Only, I would add, with the qualification that Rancière's anti-system, as of yet, does not seem to have succumb to the pessimism of Adorno's melancholy science.

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<sup>25</sup> As the complete articulation of the differential positions in a discourse. Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Verso, 2001), 105.

### The Metapolitical Grind of the Truth of Falseness

Rancière, as it has been noted already, is not often thought of as a dialectic thinker. With the exception perhaps of Jean-Pilippe Deranty's reading –which insists on the presence of a certain dialecticism in the conflict between politics and the social (the police)—<sup>26</sup> Rancière's critique of metapolitics is often seen to preclude the locating of any kind of dialectic in his thought. "The terms of Rancière's political writings are multiple and *multiplied*. They can never be reduced to two (same/other), or even to three (thesis/antithesis/synthesis), since their impurity always resists such a reduction."<sup>27</sup> Mediation –between the general and the particular– and sublation here are said to be prohibited by democratic politics in that they (mis)identify politics with the police order and in so doing, offer an achievement of politics that is equivalent to its elimination. In effect, the critical capacity that mediation and sublation offer is nothing more than the reverse of their actual incapacity; a licence to participate in the veneration of their own autonomy and a means to benefit from their particular success in failure.

Taken in a strict Hegelian sense as the intellectual expression of universal negativity –the sublation of the movement of negating negation into a total world spirit—<sup>28</sup> it is clear that there is no dialectic in Rancière's thought and politics. With Rancière the True cannot be the process of its own becoming, "the essence consummating itself through its development,"<sup>29</sup> because the smoothing over of the contradictions and particularities that this entails effectively redeems reality at the price of its loss. It is to seek "the material realization of unconditional freedom and pure thought in common forms of life and belief"<sup>30</sup> by privileging an autonomy that is itself the resignation of any means of material realization.

Interestingly enough, Rancière's critique of Hegel here is quite similar to the position taken by Marx in his "Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'." There Marx claims that with Hegel

empirical reality is taken as it is; it is declared to be rational, but it is rational not because of its own reason [as Hegel would claim] but because the empirical fact in its empirical existence has meaning other than its own [historical meaning]. The fact that served as a beginning is not conceived of as such but as a mythical result.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jean-Pilippe Deranty, "Rancière and Contemporary Political Ontology," *Theory & Event* 6.4 (2003), 4-6.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Chambers, "Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics," *European Journal of Political Theory* 10 (2011): 305.

<sup>28</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 36.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill, (London: Continuum, 2004), 27.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx, "Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited by David McLellan, 32-42, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000),33.

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In other words, the speculative constitution of political reality cannot be based in the movement of its objects, in any True sense, because Hegel's thought dissolves reality along with what genuinely determines it into the absolutization of the movements of thought.<sup>32</sup> To put a Rancièrian spin on it, this is to say that Hegel's dialectic is simply "the division of *phusis* [nature] that is called on to be achieved as community *nomos* [law]."<sup>33</sup> Hegelian dialectic is in effect the displacing of the conflict between politics and police to the scene of an ersatz consensus, a scene that is essentially a formalization of the original *phusis* of the community.

This said, where Marx's own dialectic becomes inadequate to the task of Rancière's critique is in its being turned right side up again. Marx famously quips in *Capital* that with Hegel the dialectic is standing on its head.<sup>34</sup> While the idea and its Truth are set by idealism as the driving force of history, for Marx "the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought."<sup>35</sup> History, at least *per* the late-Marx, is not driven by the smoothing over of lived-material contradictions in the ideal, but is instead driven by the very antagonisms that these contradictions create. While Rancière clearly does not subscribe to the late-Marx's historical optimism – that the social formation will of its own bring the prehistory of human society to a close<sup>36</sup> – the gap between his politics and Marx's metapolitics is not equivalent to this determinism alone. Instead, what makes Marx's reoriented dialectic inadequate to the task of critical thought is the new status of truth it creates. With Marx, Rancière maintains, "the truth of politics is the manifestation of its falseness. It is the gap between any political process of naming or inscribing *in relation to the realities subtending them*."<sup>37</sup> And while he concedes that the subtending realities might well be named and given priority, the difficulty remains that as negations of idealist affirmation, these realities are only ever real in metapolitics by means of their falseness.

Metapolitics is the discourse on the falseness of politics that splits every political manifestation of dispute, in order to prove [that manifestation's] ignorance of its own truth, every time, the gap between names and things, the gap between enunciation of

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<sup>32</sup> Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno: An Introduction*, trans. by James Rolleston, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 22.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*, 70.

<sup>34</sup> Various translated as: "With him it is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell." Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, volume one*, trans. by Ben Fowkes, (London: Penguin, 1976), 103. or as: "With (Hegel, the dialectic) is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell." Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," in *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster, 49-91, (London: Verso, 2005), 53.

<sup>35</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, volume one*, 102-3.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Marx, "Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited by David McLellan, 424-8, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 426.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*, 82. (emphasis added)

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some logos of the people, of man or of the citizenry and the account that is made of this, *the gap that reveals a fundamental injustice, itself identical with a constitutive lie*.<sup>38</sup> Metapolitics then, in making the appearance equivalent only to its radical falseness, reduces the wrong of politics to an endless reiteration of an empty truth,<sup>39</sup> and in this way succumbs to the same self-veneration and stultifying (in)capacity as the idealism it sought to invert and overcome.

Because of his historical optimism, Rancière's Marx does not need critique to accomplish anything beyond demystification. Here the unreal status of the truth produced by metapolitics is not necessarily a problem given that its task is simply to mark the mystical shell as such. The rational kernel –which Marx's claims to have salvaged from Hegel's dialectic– on the other hand does not need critique to establish its reason, as its reason is found not in either ideology or appearance but in the material-conditions themselves –in the meaning of their empirical fact. The falsehood of appearance then plays no role in any form of metapolitical emancipation, and instead exits solely to conceal. Contrary to this, Rancière's "democratic politics opposes the metapolitical play of appearance and its denial with the practice of the *as if* that constitutes a subject's form of materialization and that opens up an aesthetic community, in Kantian fashion, a community that demands the consent of the very person who does not acknowledge it."<sup>40</sup> Democratic politics and its *as if* do not then seek to dispel appearances, rather they seek to seize and reconfigure them. For Rancière,

the problem is not to accentuate the difference between this existing equality and all that belies it. It is not to contradict appearances but, on the contrary, to confirm them. Wherever the part of those who have no part is inscribed, however fragile and fleeting these inscriptions may be, a sphere of appearance of the demos is created, an element of the *kratos*, the power of the people, exists. The problem is to extend the sphere of this materialization, to maximize this power.<sup>41</sup>

The problem is to locate in negative dialectic fashion both the *as if* of subjectification and the *as is* of the police count in the same space and in so doing to dispel any monopoly the police distribution might claim over the present configuration of things.

#### **Negative Dialectic and Totality**

It is obviously difficult to establish with any clarity what it is exactly that is meant by negative dialectic. The always tempting answer is simply to say that negative dialectic is dialectic that does away with idealist affirmation. That it is simply the reverse of Hegel's infamous assertion that "the True is the

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*, 82. (emphasis added)

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

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whole.”<sup>42</sup> Though Adorno certainly maintains that “only what does not fit into this world is true,”<sup>43</sup> and that contrary to Hegel’s *dictum*, totality’s only truth is its untruth,<sup>44</sup> it would be a mistake to claim that with Adorno everything can be boiled down to an endless demonstration of the truth of falseness. Much as with Rancière, the absence of a clearly articulated alternative in Adorno’s thought should not be read as a resignation to the status quo,<sup>45</sup> nor should his interventions on a particular subject be taken as attempts at a total account.<sup>46</sup>

If the truth of the essay<sup>47</sup> gains its momentum by way of its untruth, its truth is not to be sought in mere opposition to what is ignoble and proscribed in it, but in these very things: in its mobility, its lack of that solidity which science demands, transferring it, as it were, from property-relationships to the intellect.<sup>48</sup>

To assert, as Rancière often does, that with Adorno all truth is the truth of falseness, is to assume incorrectly that the totality Adorno finds through polemic intervention is not itself hypothetical, that it is not possible to position it in such a way as to obviate itself and to mark its apparent unity as tautology.

Perhaps the easiest way to establish what is negative dialectic then is to say that it is Adorno’s method. Method here not in the sense of a particular way of applying theory, but rather as the relation between ideas and the composition of texts, as the relationship between thought and its presentation.<sup>49</sup> Negative dialectic “thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over.”<sup>50</sup> More than a simple prioritization of the particular, it is a reversal of the attitude taken in finding truth in the whole. In many ways, Adorno’s dialectic can be seen as something like a *politics* of style in the Rancièrian sense. In a revealing aphorism, from *Minima Moralia*, entitled “On the Morality of Thinking” Adorno charges that,

It is just this passing-on and being unable to linger, this tacit assent to the primacy of the general over the particular, which constitutes not only the deception of idealism in hypostasizing concepts, but also its inhumanity, that has no sooner grasped the particular than it reduces it to a through-station, and finally comes all too quickly to

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<sup>42</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 59.

<sup>44</sup> Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno: An Introduction*, 25.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Philippe Deranty, “Rancière and Contemporary Political Ontology,” 25.

<sup>46</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique* 32 (1984): 152.

<sup>47</sup> Adorno would later come to consider the essay to be the negative dialectic form *par excellence*, and as Gillian Rose notes, Adorno considered his early work on the form of the essay to be the earliest iteration of his program. See: Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, 18-21.

<sup>48</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” 168.

<sup>49</sup> Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, 16-7.

<sup>50</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” 164.

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terms with suffering and death for the sake of reconciliation occurring merely in reflection.<sup>51</sup>

Thus there is in negative dialectic something like what with Rancière has been cast as a doubling. Politics while being at once *what* is being talked about, is at the same time also *how* it is being talked about. Thought here, in keeping with Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach,<sup>52</sup> is inseparable from praxis, with Adorno maintaining that "a true praxis capable of overturning the status quo depends on theory's refusal to yield to the oblivion in which society allows thought to ossify."<sup>53</sup> The question, to which negative dialectic is ultimately Adorno's answer, is how.

Negative dialectic itself is permanently locked in a circling struggle with unity. If Hegel's dialectic can be seen in the constant moving through the contradictions towards synthesis, then Adorno's is one that at every turn refuses this synthesis and continually calls the stability of its truth into question.<sup>54</sup> In this it should be noted that Adorno does not completely part ways with Hegel as his determinate negation remains essential to Adorno's thought. As we can read in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

Determinate negation does not simply reject imperfect representations of the absolute, idols, by confronting them with the idea they are unable to match. Rather, dialectic discloses each image as script. It teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth.<sup>55</sup>

What is resisted then is idealism's magic wand,<sup>56</sup> the affirmation by means of which Hegel's negation conjures up a mythical positivity.<sup>57</sup> Where the lesson of dialectic differs then between Hegel and Adorno is in this script. For Hegel though thought is transitory, its substance is always in the end reduced to its absoluteness, to its place in unity. While his determinate negation does correctly situate thought in reality, through the negation of totality and then of thought itself, it does not sustain its apparently irrevocable place in reality and its content. Confronted with the products of affirmation, reality and its objects for Hegel are themselves always inadequate to their concept.

Adorno's dialectic, by contrast, lingers in the fissures. For him thought's substance is not its absoluteness but is instead its very mobility, its transitory and vagrant like quality.

The usual reproach against the essay, that it is fragmentary and random, itself assumes the givenness of totality and thereby the identity of subject and object, and it suggests

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<sup>51</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, 74.

<sup>52</sup> "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited by David McLellan, 171-4, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 173.

<sup>53</sup> Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 33.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Reappraisals: Shifting Alignment's in Postwar Critical Theory*, 68.

<sup>55</sup> Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno: An Introduction*, 21

<sup>57</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism & Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, 261.

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that man is in control of totality. *But the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal.* Its weakness testifies to the non-identity that it has to express, as well as to that excess of intention over its object, and thereby it points to that utopia which is blocked out by the classification of the world into the eternal and the transitory. In the emphatic essay, thought gets rid of the traditional idea of truth.<sup>58</sup>

In getting rid of this idea however, Adorno does not completely liquidate the idea of totality, as “nothing can be interpreted out of a work without at the same time being interpreted into it.”<sup>59</sup> Instead, totality and the unity it presents become for Adorno a hypothetical space in which the objects of his thought have a polemic meaning. The action of Adorno’s parataxis, which approaches its objects through dislocation, is in many ways something like the action of setting up many contentious worlds within the given one.

In this Adorno’s totality can be likened to that of Georg Lukács. For all his critiques of Lukács, especially of his later works, Adorno’s thought remains heavily indebted to the works of his former mentor.<sup>60</sup> As Peter Hohendahl suggests, “Adorno’s model of negative dialectic reflects Lukács’ concept of totality – totality not as reconciled reality but as a hypothetical concept that refers to a notion of wholeness.”<sup>61</sup> Much as how Lukács himself remains heavily indebted to the romanticism he reconfigured,<sup>62</sup> so Adorno remains attached to the works of the early Lukács, especially *The Theory of the Novel*, from which he retains Lukács’ sense of modernity, and *History and Class Consciousness*, from which he retains the concept of reification.<sup>63</sup> Thus, from Lukács, Adorno gets both his sense of the historicity of aesthetic forms and an attachment to the novel’s fragmentary and inorganic style.<sup>64</sup>

For Lukács the novel features as the modern epic. It is “the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.”<sup>65</sup> Its fragmentary nature thus is an ironic attempt to think a totality that has been made impossible by individuality. For him,

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<sup>58</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” 159.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>60</sup> Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, 45-55. Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Reappraisals: Shifting Alignment’s in Postwar Critical Theory*, 58-60. Martin Jay, *Marxism & Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, 242-50. and Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, (New-York: Free Press, 1977), 20-1.

<sup>61</sup> Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Reappraisals: Shifting Alignment’s in Postwar Critical Theory*, 72-3.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>65</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. by Anna Bostock, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974), 56. (emphasis added)

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*irony describes the attitude of the creative subject towards reality after he has realized his own problematic status in this world.* This self-consciousness articulates itself in the novel as the reflexivity of the narrator. The form of the novel, the patterns of its composition, grows out of the tension between the reflexivity of the narrator and the world as it appears in the narrative. The never-completed but always anticipated synthesis of abstract elements is brought about through the narrator's self-awareness, which thematises the gap between the interior world and the outer world, between the longing for meaning and a trivialized empirical reality.<sup>66</sup>

While with Lukács this synthesis always remains as something of a sought after horizon, with Adorno it becomes an unshakeable appearance. Something that while effective, and in this way necessary to thought, is always more tautological than it is total.

With Adorno, totality and its would be wholeness finds itself in reified thinking: that is, within a mode of thinking that makes unlike things alike through the leveling and hypostasising action of abstraction and identification, through the reduction of objects and their particulars to the signs of their identity.<sup>67</sup> For him "reification is a social category. It refers to the way in which consciousness is determined."<sup>68</sup> And while it is certainly not unfair to characterize Adorno's reification as being 'all-pervasive',<sup>69</sup> to move from this to the impossibility of its critique,<sup>70</sup> is to ignore reification's place in its own critique, to ignore its sense of space and place. Addressing the promise of civilization *contra* the dystopianism of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Adorno insists that, "Humanity includes reification as well as its opposite, not merely as the condition from which liberation is possible, but also positively as the form in which, however brittle and inadequate it may be, subjective impulses are realized, but only by being objectified."<sup>71</sup> For Adorno reification is not something that is to be overcome by thought *alone* less it be merely that reconciliation, that overcoming that only finds itself in reflection.

Totality and identity are thus not to be discarded by negative dialectic. Instead, "totality is to be opposed by convicting it of non-identity within itself –of the non-identity it denies, according to its own concept."<sup>72</sup> In this way mediation in negative dialectic is not a recourse to either the general or the more abstract, but an insistent dwelling in the particulars that this *apparent* whole must contain.<sup>73</sup> It is to set up a tautological experience of the whole through a style which while imitating the movement towards

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<sup>66</sup> Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Reappraisals: Shifting Alignment's in Postwar Critical Theory*, 61-2. (emphasis added)

<sup>67</sup> Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno: An Introduction*, 46.

<sup>68</sup> Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, 60.

<sup>69</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Verso, 2007), 46.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>71</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel Webber and Shierry Weber, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 106.

<sup>72</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton, (New-York: Seabury Press, 1973), 147.

<sup>73</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, 74.

synthesis never claims a unity and never settles on a definitive account of its objects. In *The Melancholy Science* Gillian Rose maintains that with Adorno,

An idea 'provocatively formulated' may be left and not enlarged upon, but may be restated later in the text with many different emphases. This gives an impression of confusion, but in fact amounts to a set of parallaxes, apparent displacements of an object due to changes of observation point. This is quite consistent with the idea that the object cannot be captured, and that a *set* of presentations may best approximate it.<sup>74</sup>

The relation then that the negative dialectic method posits between writing and the ideas it plays with is in a word *fragmentary*. It is to take up a polemic attitude towards the total in both *what* is being said as much as it is in *how* it is being said. In this way, if what other dialectic methods seek is to describe a dialectic pattern, negative dialectic by contrast seeks to *be* that very pattern.<sup>75</sup> At the end of "On the Morality of Thinking" Adorno muses that,

nothing less is asked of the thinker today than that he should be at every moment both within things and outside them –Münchhausen pulling himself out of the bog by his pig-tail becomes the pattern of knowledge which wishes to be more than either verification or speculation. And then the salaried philosophers come along and reproach us with having no definite point of view.<sup>76</sup>

Or, one could add: with having no replacement that might serve in the *real* order of politics.<sup>77</sup>

### **Totality and Rancière's Politics of Style**

What exactly then is that affinity between Adorno and Rancière, between negative dialecticism and Rancière's thought? Here I think that it is important to consider Rancière's politics as something that is *done*, as something that lives in his writings *on* politics and that brings about this very sense of politics through its *doing*. As I suggest in chapter 1, politics is not just what Rancière writes about it is also *how* he writes about it. In "The Essay as Form" Adorno maintains that unlike either a descriptive or a creative approach which posit and establish, the essay (and negative dialectic) inhabits and plays.

Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done. The essay mirrors what is loved and hated instead of presenting the intellect, on the model of a boundless work ethic, as *creation ex nihilo*. Luck and play are essential to the essay. It does not begin with Adam and Eve but with

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<sup>74</sup> Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, 17. (emphasis in original)

<sup>75</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, 185.

<sup>76</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, 74-5.

<sup>77</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. by Jason Barker, (London: Verso, 2005), 110.

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what it wants to discuss; it says what is at issue and stops where it feels itself complete – not where nothing is left to say.<sup>78</sup>

Its action is a polemic and fragmentary *tautolization*, an intervention into the given which through its play reconfigures this given to its ends.

To say then that there is something in Rancière's politics and thought that can be likened to negative dialectic, is to claim that in his subjectification there is a parallel to the style and commitment of Adorno. It is to suggest that the way that Rancière approaches politics is very much in keeping with that fragmentary script Adorno finds in the image. While Rancière in his writing does seek to describe the actions of subjectification and politics, in doing this he does not settle on description alone. The description of subjectification with Rancière is always itself also a subjectification of sorts, it is always something of a reconfiguration.

Rancière works in fragments. And while his writing is often, correctly, cast as polemic, as something which establishes its meaning through its critique of an already established order of things – through an established discourse, an established lexicon– to limit the discussion of his style to a discussion of polemic downplays the political significance of the commitment his polemic always lives out. If I suggest that Rancière be thought of as a thinker of fragments rather than as purely a polemicist, it is because the reconfiguration he brings about does not so much *find* itself in that which it reconfigures as it *establishes* itself. Much as how the stakes of the conflict brought about by the sudden appearance part of those who have no part can be found in both a particular and a universal sense, the stakes of his writings are not themselves confined to any one particular intervention. In a way similar to the essay and negative dialectic in Adorno, Rancière's writings, while never a *total* account, are nevertheless *an* account. They still *want* to say and are still able to find a certain completeness despite never settling on the finality of this completion.

The difficulty then with establishing any sense of a unified commitment in Rancière's work is that it is not necessarily to be found *in* his accounts, but rather *as* his accounts. To be clear, this is different from the claim Deranty makes when he suggests that the unity of Rancière's work is in their creation and presentation of a coherent conceptual world.<sup>79</sup> Instead I believe that the unity of Rancière's works is a unity of style, one that while no doubt always being oriented towards the presumption of equality,<sup>80</sup> cannot in the end survive its reduction, its hypostatization, to equality as either concept, or as

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<sup>78</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 152.

<sup>79</sup> Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Rancière and Contemporary Political Ontology," 1.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

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its self-verification.<sup>81</sup> The unity of Rancière's writings is in their thematising of the gap between politics and police, in *how* they bring about a certain reflexivity of style, one that while always localizing its instantiations of the universal, nevertheless read into these instantiations those universalities that it has always already found in whatever particular conflict it addresses.

In this way the style of Rancière's writing can be said to maintain a thinking towards totality, albeit a particularly fragmented and tautological totality. It maintains the hypothetical status of the total and takes onto itself its universalising voice but only so as to ultimately set it out as a failure in its own terms, so as to set the failure of active-form within a common sensorium that is even if only momentarily reconfigured by an impossible capacity. His *as if* then, while being an impossible play in this suspension of hierarchy and this failure of active-form, is not without a structured commitment; it is not without a want for a particular configuration of the given. As with Adorno, Rancière's writing does not completely shed either its attachment to or its patterning after a vision of things first articulated in terms of historical process. Thematised in Rancière's writing is a want for a world that is other to that of capitalist exploitation. And while, like Adorno, this want never concretizes itself into a definite position, into a clear proscription of what must be achieved, it is nevertheless always present in his attitude towards totality, in how the stakes and particularities of a given conflict are approached, and in what it is that his writing *does*.

Ultimately, I do not think that it is possible to make the claim that Rancière's politics *is* a negative dialectic in the strong sense of the term. Not least because short of an assertion that it is, negative dialectic as a style and method resist its own identification. The most that can be claimed is that there is an affinity between Rancière's writings and those of Adorno, one that would see Rancière as writing in a negative dialectic fashion. Here what it is that I would like to suggest is that Rancière's *as if*, in its moving through the fissures and in its thematised sense of commitment, can be read as a something of a negative dialectic, but one that has not succumbed, as did Schönberg's twelve tone system and Adorno's own negative dialectic before it,<sup>82</sup> to the seemingly inevitable predictability that befalls any anti-system over time.

With Rancière there can be no question that it is only the "occultation of the ear" that makes critique possible.<sup>83</sup> Lyotard's famous suggestion that Adorno replaced God with the devil, that his

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<sup>81</sup> Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 157.

<sup>82</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, 188-90.

<sup>83</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Adorno as the Devil," trans. by Robert Hurley, *Telos* 19 (1974): 130.

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negative dialectic transformed Hegel's totality merely into the impossibility of reconciliation,<sup>84</sup> and in this way created a theology without economics, one where "criticism can only redouble the space where its discourse plunges its object,"<sup>85</sup> is exposed by Rancière as simply another plot where thought seeks its emancipation from its material condition. A plot where (this time deconstructivist) inversion seeks an autonomy that is nothing but its resignation from the heteronomy that gives it sense and understanding. What Rancière's *as if* accomplishes is to redouble not the space, which is common, but its *objects*. It shows that the problem is not that we do not know what to do, but that we think that we do not know, that we think we do not understand, that we accept the conditions of the given, its attribution of capacities and its account, in seeking to emancipate thought from the world of sense. To put it differently, the problem is that we resign our *capacity* to play and to reconfigure, and we instead settle on opposing appearances, when the problem is – simply – to *confirm* them. This is where Rancière is at his most negative dialectic, when he asserts that politics convicts the order of the given in its own terms by *being* the very capacity the very equality it says is impossible.

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<sup>84</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Adorno as the Devil," 132.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

## Conclusion

Thus, it would be assumed that the incapable are capable; that there is no hidden secret of the machine that keeps them trapped in their place. It would be assumed that there is no fatal mechanism transforming reality into images; no monstrous beast absorbing all desires and energies into its belly; no lost community to be restored. What there is are simply scenes of dissensus, capable of surfacing in any place at any time.<sup>1</sup>

-Jacques Rancière

Whether or not Rancière can be definitively situated in the western-Marxist tradition, is in the end perhaps not as significant as the question of what it is that his thought and writing can bring to it. Gone with Rancière is the task of the educator, and with it the view that critique should seek to inhabit experience so as to elicit those valid aspects of appearance that point beyond the given.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Rancière's politics seek to emphasise that surplus which always already signals the given's tautological status. Indeed, Rancière's politics hints at new configurations of the possible, not by seeking to impart the incapable with capacity, but by positing the foolish assumption that the incapable are always *already* capable. It posits that what makes them capable and what makes politics possible is that there is something common between those who count and those who do not, that common appearance is not something to be denied or refuted, but that it is instead to be confirmed.

Of course this appearance is not simply a common surface, an inert clay waiting to be remolded and reconfigured (by an educator or an engaged intellectual). The worlds of equality and inequality for Rancière are made of the same stuff. The conditions of equality are not the negation of those of inequality but a reversal and co-option. And while certainly there can be for him no history as unified longitudinal totality, no suprahistorical perspective,<sup>3</sup> there is nevertheless a history woven into the fabric of the common sensible. A history that, while never reducible to a single historicity, to a single determinism, still carries with it a number of historicities and determinisms. What Rancière brings to the study of western-Marxism is a means of demonstrating that taking up an attitude *towards* totality does not necessarily grantee critiques coalescence into a leftism of faith.<sup>4</sup> A means of demonstrating that the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott, (London: Verso, 2011), 48.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Verso, 2007), xxiii.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 152.

<sup>4</sup> His recent account of equality in terms of the *light* taken in by the camera lens as the light of Heraclitus can, I think, be seen as a play with this particular charge. See: Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, trans. by Julie Rose, (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 13-5. and, Jean-François Lyotard, "Adorno as the Devil," trans. by Robert Hurley, *Telos* 19 (1974): 130.

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capacities of the order of inequality are no different from those of equality and that far from being a vain search for the ground from which to resist, critique can have part in affirmation.

What his writings offer is a way of revisiting negative dialectic in a post '68 landscape, a way of reintroducing totality into a discourse that has long held it as anathema.<sup>5</sup> Rather than seeing totality as a unified historical process, a common *telos* tied to a determination in the last-instance of the socio-political by the economic,<sup>6</sup> Rancière's totality is one that is always already tautological. In being as such however it is not liquidated of that sense of a fate-dealing historicity. His is an effective tautology, one that polices what it is that is to be seen, heard and counted, and what it is that is not. Marshaling that very particular autonomy of aesthetic experience, Rancière's thought opens up the possibility for *play* in heteronomy.

Similarly, Rancière's thought is a demonstration that the critique of history need not be the resignation of commitment Jean-Paul Sartre cast it as, that "behind history, of course, the target is Marxism. This is an attempt to constitute a new ideology, the last bulwark which the bourgeoisie can still erect against Marx."<sup>7</sup> Rancière's sense of the common sensible is not one that simply swaps its determinisms, inverting Althusser's *dictum* only to arrive at a determination in the last-instance, this time, of the economic by the social.<sup>8</sup> Nor is his intent to make politics synonymous with the social, of tying politics to the practice of articulation and the taming of an overdetermined field of meaning.<sup>9</sup> Instead it is a commitment that situates itself in the historicity of aesthetic form, offering a critique of Critical Theory that is better seen as reconfiguration than as complete disavowal and rupture.

What I have tried to accomplish in reading Rancière as I have, is to show that universality and locality do not need to be set as mutually exclusive categories. Phrased differently, I have argued that the priority of difference and particularity is not incompatible with a sense of commitment and does not require the liquidation of the universal, or a complete departure from the concepts of totality and effective-history. Of course in this, my work here is only itself a fragment and by no means an attempt at anything like a definitive account. Rancière's thought, which traces the effectivity and sense of

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism & Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 514-5.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation," in *Lenin and Philosophy: and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster, 127-86, (New-York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 134-7.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism & Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 520.

<sup>8</sup> Norman Geras, "Post-Marxism?," *New Left Review* 163 (1987): 40-82.

<sup>9</sup> Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Verso, 2001).

## CONCLUSION

paradoxical relations between negatively constituted concepts, I think makes any such attempt futile. I do however think that the reading of Rancière with a view towards a commitment in style is one that could open up further inquiries, especially considering the themes taken up in his recent publication, *Le fil perdu*, in 2014.<sup>10</sup> There might also be something to be found in comparing the monad of critical theory with what Rancière suggests is Jacotot's panecasticism, something that "looks for the *totality* of human intelligence in *each* intellectual manifestation."<sup>11</sup> Here it might be possible to read a reversal of the senses of capacity that underlie the experience of a monadic object and its position relative to a conceptual totality.

In the end, while it remains possible to read Rancière's politics as one that effects a particularly resigned form of metapolitics (or ultrapolitics) –as one that instigates the emergence of some pure form of politics, be it anarchic or Jacobin—<sup>12</sup> it is at the same time no less possible to combine the reading of his politics as one of impurity,<sup>13</sup> with a fresh take on emancipatory commitment, one that might well avoid the systematization that has dogged those 'Kantian' aspects of Adorno's thought.<sup>14</sup> With Rancière, it is possible to find a sense of strategy and commitment, one that no doubt creates a distance from the procedures of Critical Theory, but one that does not necessarily reduce Rancière's Marxism to that of an ex-Marxism. No doubt, if Rancière is a Marxist he is a strange Marxist, but perhaps nothing more is needed now than this: that strangeness which insists on the locality of the universal, the autonomy of heteronomy, and the capacity of the incapable.

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Le fil perdu: Essais sur la fiction moderne*, (Paris: La fabrique, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant School Master: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 39.

<sup>12</sup> Todd May, *Contemporary Political Movements and the Thought of Jacques Rancière: Equality in Action*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010). and, Slavoj Žižek, "The Lesson of Rancière," afterword to *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, by Jacques Rancière, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill, (London: Continuum, 2004), 75.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Chambers, "Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics," *European Journal of Political Theory* 10 (2011): 316.

<sup>14</sup> Nigel Gibson, "Rethinking an Old Saw: Dialectical Negativity, Utopia and Negative Dialectic in Adorno's Hegelian Marxism," in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin, 257-91, (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), 283.

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