

## **Rancière's *Two Theses on Politics: The Disempowering Dualism of Dissensus*** **By Tyler Olsen**

### **Introduction**

Over the past several decades, Jacques Rancière has advanced a systematic political philosophy that takes aim at the entire tradition of political philosophy, from Plato, to Marx, to Arendt, and beyond. One brief text in particular, his “Ten Theses on Politics,” presents his searing critique in an unrivaled density meant to provoke his readers to reimagine the category of politics, the relation of politics to political philosophy, and the possibilities of radical political action in the present. I submit that these ten theses are in fact reducible to just two theses: (1) the necessity of *material* inequality as the animating impulse of the dominant institutions of every social order, i.e., the ground of Rancière’s notion of the police; and (2), the necessity of a *necessarily immaterial* equality of intelligence between all human beings, i.e., the ground of what Rancière refers to as politics, democracy, dissensus, or disagreement (these terms all being equivalent for Rancière). These two ontological presuppositions constitute Rancière’s dualism, which, I argue has a disempowering effect on his audience. Whereas Rancière hopes to shake his readers out of their slumber, thus empowering them to see the world in a new way, I argue that his dualism, to the contrary, contributes to precisely the kind of fatalism and submission to the status quo that he so reviles.

Although I have named Rancière’s “political philosophy” and his “ontology,” in his own meta-theoretical comments, Rancière has consistently denied that he is doing anything that could be called political philosophy and has criticized his peers for engaging in ontology, or, as he puts it, for “ontologizing the *aporia*” of the foundation of politics. Nonetheless, as I hope to demonstrate, Rancière too plays the purportedly corrupt game of ontology; but he has good reasons

for denying that fact: he sees such a denial as part of a project to establish an empowering mythology or “foundational fiction” that inspires political action.

By “ontology” I simply refer to the undemonstrable presuppositions of thought that must be posited in order to make sense of the world. As Cornelius Castoriadis puts it: “Since Plato, it has been known that every demonstration presupposes something which is not demonstrable... the foundational illusion has never been shared by the great philosophers: not by Plato, not by Aristotle, not by Kant, not by Hegel” (Castoriadis, 1991: 87). Castoriadis insists that the delusion of transcending the non-demonstrable presuppositions of thought first makes an appearance with modern epistemology, with Cartesian doubt (and its corollary certainty) serving as the exemplar of this delusion. From Aristotle up to the present, the study of these non-demonstrable presuppositions has gone under the banner of metaphysics or ontology. The empiricists of modern philosophy (and the logical positivists who would later radicalize their position) thought that they had achieved perception of brute facts, independent of any intellectual presuppositions, and had thus escaped from metaphysics or ontology. However, as Hegel indicates, they nonetheless must presuppose certain categories of thought that cannot themselves be observed, such as: matter, force, one, many, universality, motion, causality (Hegel, 1991: 79). Insofar as we limit ourselves to mere empirical observation of *physical* phenomenon without resorting to any *metaphysical* or ontological categories, we are reduced to Humean skepticism and must concede that the sun may not rise tomorrow. On the other hand, like the rationalists of modern philosophy, if we deny the possibility of perceiving anything that isn’t determined by human consciousness (e.g., Leibnez), we are reduced to the absurd conclusion that we can never perceive anything new. The Hegelian dialectic sought to cut through these two positions, and insisted that neither side of the dialectic between subject (human consciousness) and object (the social totality) should be clung to one-

sidedly. Instead, he insisted that the subject and object co-constitute each other and necessarily exist in dialectical interpenetration.

The dualist ontology that lies behind Rancière's foundational fiction, on my account, amounts to the hypostatization of both sides of the Hegelian dialectic; which is to say that Rancière clings one-sidedly to both sides of the dialectic. Pushing against Althusser's thesis that consciousness is necessarily interpellated by the inegalitarian logic of ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 2014), Rancière wants to assert the foundational equality of intelligence as intrinsic to the human subject. Thus, Rancière's *idealism* asserts the necessity of intellectual or spiritual equality. On the flip side, despite his efforts to presuppose and assert the equality of intelligence of those who are symbolically excluded and treated as unequal, Rancière's *materialism* actually presupposes and affirms Althusser's claim that the Marxian superstructure has a material existence in everyday life.

But while Althusser affirms the material existence of ideology, for him, it nonetheless *remains ideology*, i.e., a fundamental distortion of the social basis of private power. For Rancière, in contrast, the materiality of inequality is not a fundamental distortion of reality; it is instead the necessary shape of any human society whatsoever. Indeed, the social bond, for Rancière, is necessarily inegalitarian. Whereas Althusser ahistorically asserts the necessity of an ideological superstructure that manifests materially in everyday life to produce a kind of habitus of inequality, Rancière believes the lie of that superstructure, and ahistorically asserts that everyday life in social reality is *in itself* (and not merely in its ideological inversion) inegalitarian by its very nature. Rancière pushes against Althusserian interpellation in order to make space for the freedom of the subject to be otherwise than the ideological conditioning of the objective social totality. But he asserts the freedom of the subject at the expense of the determinism of the object.

It is as though the empiricists and the rationalists—each of whom were criticized by Hegel for clinging one-sidedly to opposite sides of the dialectic—were united into a single figure that reduces reality to two contradictory claims that are each, in themselves, dogmatic. Rancière maintains his two theses in the hopes that it generates a productive tension or dialectical interpenetration that motivates action. The simultaneous perception that objective social institutions are inegalitarian and that human subjects are equal should provoke radical action in the subject. However, because Rancière’s two theses assert such an overwhelming sense of necessity—that every social institution is inegalitarian and that equality cannot be socially instituted—I argue that they are politically demobilizing.

Rancière’s dualism asserts the necessity of a certain conception of the subject and the necessity of a certain conception of the object. Rather than the two sides of the dialectic, which constitute a productive contradiction, then, Rancière’s two theses compose an immobilizing contradiction of two mutually exclusive ontological principles, which, taken together, reify the present and contribute to the closing off of the political imagination. Insofar as his texts have any impact on political action at all, it is likely to discourage people who are *not already engaged* from entering the political fray and claiming the rights they don’t yet have.

### **Plato, Post-foundationalism, and Rancière’s Foundational Fiction**

Although Rancière often advances a spirited critique of Plato’s “resolute hatred of democracy” (Rancière, 1999: 10), he occasionally expresses a genuine admiration of Plato’s philosophical and political project. In a 2011 article, Rancière indicates that although philosophy is the activity that “promises to tell the truth about Truth,” Plato understood that this “can only be told as a myth,” that a “noble lie” would need to be fabricated as the foundation of any new social order (Rancière, 2011: 15).

If there is a privilege of philosophy, it lies in the frankness with which it tells us that the truth about Truth is a fiction and undoes the hierarchy just as it builds it. An egalitarian practice of philosophy, as I understand it, is a practice that enacts the aporia of foundation, which is the necessity of a poetical act to constitute an *arkhê* of the *arkhê*, an authority of the authority. I am aware that I am not the only person committed to this task (Rancière, 2011: 15).

Rancière sees philosophy as an activity that attempts to poetically construct a foundational fiction that will serve as the contingently instituted myth at the ground of the social order. He admires Plato's frankness in acknowledging this fact through the image of the noble lie. He is committed to the project of enacting his own foundation fiction; but rather than constructing any old *mythos*, Rancière aims to construct one that would enact the aporia of foundation, thus making the poetic, contingent, fictional status of the foundation visible in the very act of founding it. This kind of foundational fiction would *undo hierarchy while simultaneously establishing it*. Finally, Rancière acknowledges the fact that within the philosophical battlefield of competing foundational attempts, he is not the only person committed to the task of laying a foundational fiction that simultaneously establishes hierarchy and breaks it down. That is to say, there are other post-foundational philosophers working towards this very same objective.

By "post-foundational," I simply refer to the philosophical perspective that posits the ungroundable status of social reality, and thus the impossibility of identifying or establishing a final or natural foundation for knowledges, social practices, or institutions of state and society. Moving beyond forms of thought that attribute a permanent essence to the human being or to human society, and beyond those that posit some kind of "cunning" or *telos* to history, post-foundational theory asserts the historical contingency of any given regime of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1970); its lack of rootedness in an unchanging nature, a teleological schema, a divine revelation, or any sort of essentialist foundation whatsoever. Nonetheless, there is a *kind of* foundation in any given time and place: in any society there is a foundational horizon of

intelligibility, empirically embedded in social practices, institutions, and imaginaries, which serves both to constrain and to open up the possibilities of social life, and which is contingently instituted and subject to transformation. Rancière, who shares in this post-foundational perspective, admires Plato for anticipating this 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical insight over 2000 years ago.

In *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983), we again encounter Rancière's account of Plato's "extraordinary frankness" in expressing the necessity of establishing both knowledge and social order on a foundational fiction rather than on the firm soil of some sort of knowledge of society, science of science, or truth of Truth (Rancière, 2004: 52). This frankness distinguishes Plato from later thinkers (e.g., Marx, Althusser, Bourdieu) who will obscure the necessity of a foundational fiction in their attempts to found a genuine (i.e., non-poetic) science of society or foundation of knowledge. Embedded in the image of the noble lie, Plato's extraordinary frankness expresses "the paradox of [philosophy's] very institution" (Rancière, 2004: 52). That is to say: despite its apparent concern with the truth of Truth, despite its claim that it is distinct from both the technical knowledge of the artisans and the poetic creation of the playwrights, philosophy—along with the mythical tales it spins—is only established as legitimate through those very myths. Philosophy's legitimacy is enacted through the images, narratives, metaphors, and stories that it furnishes for itself. Once philosophy is established as legitimate, it produces the appearance of truth. First comes legitimacy, through fiction; then comes truth, through the effects of that fiction on the social order. The technical knowledge of the artisans, on the other hand, is legitimate only insofar as it is able to consistently produce some material good for human civilization. That is to say, technical knowledge is legitimated by its effects, whereas philosophy is legitimated by its fictions; but it produces determinate truth effects insofar as it is established as legitimate.

Plato's project, then, consists in the effort to create a specific truth effect in the sphere of appearances; in the sphere of the *doxa* (prevailing public opinion) within which all politics and all human life necessarily unfold. Rancière thus insists that Plato is not primarily concerned with the imposition of his truth or with the establishment of an inegalitarian order. Instead, he aims *to create a specific effect*. Plato hopes that his foundational fiction will be "the fiction that chases the artisan from the realm of fiction... Its concern is less to lock others up than to protect itself from them, less to impose its truth than to safeguard its appearance. Nobility, we know, consists of that first and foremost" (Rancière, 2004: 52). On Rancière's account, Plato seeks to police the sphere of appearance, to ensure that the overly passionate rabble rousers of the democratic assembly are not able to constitute foundational fictions that will end up structuring the configuration of the prevailing appearances in the sphere of *doxa*. Plato seeks, in short, to create an aristocracy of appearances, to preserve the capacity of configuring the space of sensible reality for the clear-headed philosophical elite. To do this, he must establish the rigid division between philosophy on the one hand, and fiction, poetry, technical knowledge, and political rhetoric on the other. Thus the eminently rational philosophers, unmoved by the turbulence of the moment, will reserve for themselves the right to poetically produce the foundational fictions that have the effect of instituting certain form-giving principles that give shape to the social order.

While Rancière often charges Plato with the will to establish an inegalitarian, aristocratic social order that corrects the excesses of oligarchy without resorting to democracy, here we see that he charges Plato with something else entirely: Plato aims to police the domain of poetics so as to ensure that he and his cadre of philosophers possess a monopoly on the production of the foundational fictions that lay at the basis of all appearances. Though the effect of his policing of the realm of fiction may well be to bring about an inegalitarian social order, his principal aim is,

on this account, to police the realm of fiction. The construction of foundational myths “must be reserved” for the enlightened philosophers (Rancière, 2004: 17).

Perceiving a destructive dynamic in the interaction between the rich and the poor in the democratic assembly, Plato aimed to correct the problem through his foundational myth. This noble lie aimed to disqualify both the oligarchs and the democrats, both the rich and the poor, from the ability to contribute to the symbolic constitution of the social, thereby privileging the philosophers as uniquely qualified in this task. On this reading, Plato hoped to bring some stability to the realm of appearances through his philosophical interventions.

Rancière perceives Plato’s myth-making strategy as adding a third party—the philosopher—to the troubling relation between the oligarchs and the democrats. Rancière traces the pernicious legacy of this strategy as follows: (1) the oligarchs tend to dominate the capacity to construct the symbolic constitution of the social through their foundational fictions, whether the “nobility” of pre-Cleisthenic Athens or the “meritocracy” of the present; (2) the philosophers, with their distinctions between high and low, only tend to reinforce the reigning authority structure, with its divisions between nobles or experts on the one hand, and commoners or deplorables on the other; and (3) the common people, the rabble-rousers, the riff-raff, the working poor, the immigrants without papers, the mad, the sexual deviants—in short *the demos* of any given time or place—tend to be excluded from the privilege of contributing to the symbolic constitution of the social by way of the dynamic at work in the interplay between the power of the oligarchs and the legitimating myths offered by all stripes of philosophers, social scientists, sociologists, and otherwise academically distinguished elites. Plato, like Marx, Althusser, and Bourdieu, meant well. They intended to undercut the strength of the oligarchs. But in reserving for the intellectuals the privilege of symbolically constituting the space of social reality, they excluded the masses from



this project and unwittingly provided the *intellectual* support needed by an economic elite intent on securing their *material* privilege in the social hierarchy.

Rancière sets out to undermine the project of all these intellectuals. But he does so by “paradoxically” attempting to lay his own foundational myth or fiction. It would have to be a fiction that both undermines the legitimacy of intellectuals to construct such fictions and that undermines the reigning fiction that is operative in the oligarchic structure of social reality. Thus, in a reversal of what he takes to be Plato’s objective of chasing out the common artisans, farmers, and working poor, Rancière *seems* to gesture towards their inclusion. He sees his practice of philosophy as “an-archival” and “egalitarian,” which means that he wants to lay a foundation that “undoes the hierarchy just as it builds it” (Rancière, 2004: 14-15). That is to say, Rancière believes that his (post)foundational fiction would empower the demos to contribute to such fictional projects, and *thereby* to undermine the concrete institutional dominance of the oligarchs. It is through their access to participation in the symbolic constitution the realm of *doxa*—of appearances, of the prevailing public opinion, of the symbolic constitution of the social—that the demos will be able to fight the formally institutionalized oppression that they face at the hands of the oligarchs.

Given this general picture of Rancière’s project, it is important to keep in mind what Rancière refers to as the “polemical context” in which he has written his works. In the first of his *Ten Theses*, Rancière insists that his articulation of the specificity of politics

must be distinguished carefully from the current and widespread propositions regarding the return of the political. The context of state consensus that has developed since the 1990s has brought with it a profusion of affirmations proclaiming the end of the illusion of the social and a return to a ‘pure’ form of politics... In practice, this celebration of pure politics relinquishes the virtue associated with the political good, handing it over to governmental oligarchies enlightened by their experts (Rancière, 2010: 35-36).

Often drawing on Leo Strauss or Hannah Arendt's image of the Greek *polis*, Rancière contends, many theorists of "the political" tended to emphasize the opposition between the purity of "the political sphere of public action and speech and the realm of economical and social necessity" (Rancière, 2011: 3). Despite the fact that such theories were offered as ideals against which to criticize the present, Rancière insists that they played right into the hands of a neoliberal rationality that was being marshalled to depoliticize economic, domestic, and social injustices by pushing them to the "private" side of the public-private frontier, leaving the "public" bureaucracies and institutions of the neoliberal state—dominated by various experts and their technical knowledge—as the only places in which politics legitimately occurs. Rancière argued that political philosophy—even the radical leftist versions rooted in the post-foundational perspective—was unwittingly bolstering the neoliberal consensus at the so-called end of history. It is this perceived conjunction of the project of neoliberalism and the project of political philosophy that constitutes what Rancière refers to as the "polemical context of [his] argumentation" (Rancière, 2011: 2).

The set of technical knowledges that constitute the contemporary neoliberal consensus rest on a particular foundational fiction that is specific to modern societies. This fiction asserts: (1) the ultimate authority of scientific *knowledge* as against the ignorance of unscientific *opinions*; and (2) the reality of the meritocracy, wherein the technically most adept or qualified rise to the top of the technocracy. Two of the specific truth effects created by this fiction are the institutional construction of material inequality and the intellectual belief in its truth, necessity, and justice. The *faith* in science and meritocracy has structured the hierarchies of authority and decision-making procedures throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, thereby reserving for the experts the right to make decisions, and subjecting the non-experts to the mercy of the expert knowledge systems and decision-making procedures that embody the prevailing scientific consensus. While

there was once a Keynesian technocratic consensus that benefitted from this foundational edifice, as the Western social order encountered a determinate crisis in the 1970s, one technocratic content was easily replaced with another, that of neoliberal rationality.

Rather than remaining at the level of appearances or “truth effects” (i.e., inequality), Rancière seeks to undermine the foundational fiction that undergirds the technical knowledge of the neoliberal consensus through the consolidation of a new foundational fiction. Thus, the purpose of Rancière’s *two theses on politics* is as follows. The equality thesis would undermine the technocratic faith in experts, while simultaneously empowering the non-experts. The oligarchy thesis would undermine the faith in meritocracy and enlist the passion of egalitarian action against the inegalitarian neoliberal consensus of the contemporary police order. This, in any case, seems to be Rancière’s strategy—Rancière’s philosophical ambition.

Many of the political theorists that can be described as post-foundationalists (e.g. Claude Lefort, Étienne Balibar, Cornelius Castoriadis, Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Alain Badiou) assert the necessity of social conflict in any given time or place. Thus, although there is no necessary or natural ground to social reality, and every ground is a contingent, poetic achievement, there is something constant, namely social conflict. Drawing on readings of Aristotle, Machiavelli, or Marx, these thinkers see social relations as necessarily structured by a central division between the weak and the powerful. Thus, despite their refusal to assert a strong ontological claim in the form of a necessary or natural ground to the social, they do assert a weak ontological claim by asserting that any social order is necessarily structured by conflict. Rancière too sees social relations as necessarily antagonistic, as necessarily resting on conflict or division; but he gives this picture his own unique spin, which constitutes his dualism. Rather than focusing on the idea that social conflict is necessary (and perhaps thinking about what sorts of institutions would give the

poor, oppressed, and excluded the upper hand), Rancière abstracts a principle, presupposition, or “logic” from each side of the social conflict and hypostatizes each one.

On the one hand, there is the principle or “logic” of inequality, which serves as the necessary foundation of any and every social order *in its materiality*; this is the logic of hierarchies, institutions, and authority structures. This is the presupposition of the wealthy and powerful, who dominate the social hierarchy of any and every society. This is the logic of Rancière’s “police order.” On the other hand, we have the principle or “logic” of equality, which is the universal equality of the *logos*, and serves as the animus or presupposition for all instances of political action that seek to disrupt and transform the inequality embedded in the material institutions of society. This is the equality of any speaking being with any other, and is necessarily an immaterial, spiritual, or “intellectual” equality. This is the presupposition of the weak and disadvantaged, who seek to claim the rights that they do not have.

But, for Rancière, this universal equality of intelligence also serves as a necessary ground of the inegalitarian social hierarchies insofar as it must be presupposed in order to explain to the oppressed why they deserve their diminished lot in life. Whether such inegalitarian social relations are justified by appeal to the divine right of kings or to the idea of the meritocracy and the reign of scientific knowledge, the inegalitarian explanation that justifies hierarchy must presuppose the equality of the oppressed and excluded in their capacity to comprehend the foundational fiction that justifies their position in the police order. Thus, despite the necessarily oligarchical and inegalitarian materiality of any possible society, every social order is simultaneously constituted by the immaterial equality of intelligence, without which inequality itself would be impossible. This is the core of Rancière’s foundational fiction.

### **Rancière’s Dualism: The Universal Equality of the *Logos***

Rancière describes the “equality of anyone at all with anyone else” (1999: 15) as “the ultimate equality on which any social order rests” (1999: 16), suggesting that it plays the role of a ontological foundation that persists in every possible social order. He variously refers to this form of equality as: the “original equality of the logos” (1999: 18); “the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being” (1999: 30); the “apolitical structural vacuum of equality between anyone and everyone” (1999: 34); the “equality of intelligence, the *absolute condition* of all communication and any social order” (1999: 34, emphasis added); and “the equality of intelligence... the common bond of humankind, the *necessary and sufficient condition* for a society of men to exist” (Rancière, 1991: 73, emphasis added). This foundational equality of intelligence is not contingent upon some politically instituted social order. To the contrary, Rancière specifies it as a necessary component of every possible social order.

Rancière insists that his originary equality of the logos was the form of equality *effective in* the political activity of the Athenian democracy (Rancière, 1999: 15-16). This equality “takes effect as” the freedom of the demos; the freedom of the demos “presents philosophy with... the effect of” this equality (1999: 18, 15). According to Rancière, his transcendental equality causes freedom, and in fact appears concretely *as freedom* and thus *is freedom*. He puts it differently, generalizing from his account of Athenian history to his understanding of politics as such:

Politics occurs because, or when, the natural order of the shepherd kings, the warlords, or property owners is interrupted by a freedom that crops up and makes real the ultimate equality on which any social order rests (1999: 16)

Freedom “makes real” Rancière’s equality of intelligence, which begins to sound like an ontological substance that makes its empirical appearance in the form of political freedom. This notion of politics points to those situations in which this ultimate equality is *made real* by the free

action of singular assemblages of people. In such instances, equality functions as a *presupposition of action* that people assume as a starting point rather than positing as a goal. When it makes a concrete appearance (*in* political activity and *as* freedom), this presupposition of equality “itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being” (1999: 30). For Rancière, insofar as equality is presupposed by political actors and put into action, it has the *effect of* exposing the contingency of the social order despite the latter’s claim to (or appearance as) necessity or nature.

In addition to arguing that the presupposition or enactment of the universal equality of intelligence has the effect of exposing or demonstrating the necessary contingency of the social order, Rancière also, strangely, *identifies* this equality with the notion of the contingency itself:

This equality is simply the equality of anyone at all with anyone else: in other words, in the final analysis, the absence of *arkhê*, the sheer contingency of any social order (Rancière, 1999: 15).

Here we see that Rancière’s universal equality is identified with “the absence of *arkhê*,” which is described as “the sheer contingency of any social order.” This identification of equality and contingency has caused some confusion for many theorists who have commented on Rancière’s thought.<sup>1</sup> But a clue as to Rancière’s understanding of the relation between equality and contingency comes in the 2011 article I cited above. Comparing his philosophical activity to dissensus—which he insists is not only the *object* of his writing but also its *method*—Rancière says that in his work he attempts to disclose “the contingency or the poetic character of any *arkhê*” (Rancière, 2011: 15). In this passage Rancière substitutes the notion of contingency with the notion of poetic. A contingent *arkhê* is simply a poetic *arkhê*. His meaning of “poetic” is clarified through his discussion of what he calls a “poetics of knowledge.”

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, see Oliver Marchart (2011: 136-137) and Jody Dean (2011: 87-89).

A poetics of knowledge can be viewed as a kind of ‘deconstructive practice’, to the extent that it tries to trace back an established knowledge—history, political science, sociology, and so on—to the poetic operations—description, narration, metaphorization, symbolization, and so on—that make its objects appear and give sense and relevance to its propositions. What is important to me is that this ‘reduction’ of scientific discourse to the poetical moment means its reduction to the equality of speaking beings (Rancière, 2011: 14).

All forms of authoritative or scientific knowledge, upon which social hierarchies are founded, were constructed through a series of narratives and discourses that managed to be presented as science, as tradition, or as otherwise true. Instead of being perceived as contingently constructed and politically instituted as truth, such knowledges end up appearing as necessary truths and function as taken for granted presuppositions. The purpose of a poetics of knowledge is to reveal the contingent linguistic or literary origins of those knowledges and to reveal the processes through which they were able to transcend that status. As Rancière puts it in his introduction to *The Names of History*, a poetics of knowledge is “a study of the set of literary procedures by which a discourse escapes literature, gives itself the status of a science, and signifies this status” (Rancière, 1994: 8). The contingent, literary origin of a knowledge that is regarded as scientific or otherwise as true would be exposed in Rancière’s “deconstructive practice.” Contingency, for Rancière, points to the constitutive linguistic element of all knowledge and authority. If authority rests upon knowledge or tradition, and both knowledge and tradition rest upon the poetic operations of language, then the necessary ground of any society is language. But there is no necessary relation between words, the meanings that are attached to those words, and the objects or referents to which those words point. This ultimate contingency of the relation between words, concepts, and things is the very contingency that underlies every social order for Rancière.

Throughout *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) Rancière riffs on this connection between the contingency of the social order and the contingency of the relation between words, concepts,

and things under the banner of “arbitrary” (see especially pp 58-71, and 78). In *On the Shores of Politics* (1995), he concisely explains the implications of this observation for his account of political life in a small section titled “Community and Society: The Paradox of Equality.” (80-84). Language, in itself, is devoid of meaning or sense: it is arbitrary. Thus, the person who speaks and the person who listens must “invest [the words] with meaning at each use” (Rancière, 1995: 81). In each speech act, participants must actively construct the meaning of the words from out of the context of an entire life of experience and an entire world of significant interrelations between words, things, memories, projects, etc. The meanings of words do not inhere in the signs themselves. It is only insofar as every speech act is a hermeneutic appropriation—both on the part of the speaker and on the part of the listener—that meaning can be shared and communication can occur. For Rancière, this pragmatics of communication has two implications: (1) every speech act assumes an interlocutor whose intellectual agency must actively construct the meaning of the words, a meaning which cannot be deduced from a “pre-existing code or dictionary”; and (2), there is only one way to be “intelligent” (Rancière, 1995: 81-82). Thus all discourses of authority—which are contingently/poetically constructed and constituted as truth—are always contingently re-constructed each time they are comprehended as legitimate. Each act of re-construction implies the activity of an intelligence that is equal to any other, and which is capable of re-constructing those discourses of authority in a new way. It is through the linguistic capacity of human beings that meaning, knowledge, authority, power, and hierarchies are constituted. It is also through this linguistic capacity that humans are able to appropriate the reigning meanings of social relations and to put those significations to new uses.

Both contingency and equality are tied together with the poetic or linguistic operations at the basis of every act of communication, every form of knowledge, and every social hierarchy or



power structure. Because authority rests upon a chain of modifiable poetic constructs, it is always possible that the linguistic chains upon which authority rests could be unraveled by political action that enacts the originary equality of the logos and transforms the meaning of words, thereby undermining authority and asserting human freedom. Such action reveals the contingency of a given authority by demonstrating the contingency of the meaning of the discourse that grounds that authority; by showing, for instance, that “right” could signify newly, could be used as a democratic justification for the power of the people rather than a divine justification for the power of the king. This is what Rancière means when he describes political activity as “whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination” (Rancière, 1999: 30). Political action brings into play the meaning of authoritative discourses, thus reconfiguring the relations between words and things, between knowledge and authority, between discourses that keep bodies in their place and the variable designations and destinations of those places and/or bodies. Such egalitarian reconfigurations make the contingent/poetic foundations of authority explicit as such and reconfigure certain linguistic chains that ground authority, thereby shifting the configuration of roles, places, bodies, and ways of thinking, acting, and being in the world.

The equality of intelligence, for Rancière, is a necessary, ontological structure of human coexistence; but that originary equality has no necessary form of appearance. Thus, as the “sole principle” of politics, equality “is not peculiar to it [politics] and is in no way in itself political. All equality does is lend politics reality in the form of specific cases to inscribe, in the form of litigation, confirmation of the equality at the heart of the police order” (Rancière, 1999: 31-32). Insofar as structures of power go unchallenged and are left to signify their poetic foundations as though they were authoritative, the equal capacity of speaking beings reconstructs the authoritative discourses unchanged, and the hermeneutic appropriation of meaning only reproduces the truth of

the social hierarchies, instilling a belief in their necessity. In this case, the ontological equality of the logos makes its empirical appearance *as subservience*. But when political actors hermeneutically appropriate the authoritative linguistic chains in disruptive ways that unsettle habituated patterns of thought and action, thereby revealing the poetic/contingent character of the reigning power structure, then Rancière's ontological equality makes its empirical appearance *as freedom*.

If there is a necessary place for a contingent ground of any social order, for Rancière that sheerly contingent ground is necessarily the poetic operations of language that establish a set of discourses as a foundational fiction. That foundational fiction, established as true, and as an ordering-legitimizing horizon of intelligibility for the organization of social hierarchies, privileges, and authority structures, is itself only possible on the basis of a capacity for language or intelligence that is equally distributed among human beings. Despite Rancière's apparent identification of equality with contingency, in the theoretical moves that he makes in the construction of his theory of politics, he does not in fact identify the two concepts. Rather, he derives both equality and contingency from the logos, the ultimate foundation of all contingent foundations and of all egalitarian political action that disrupts those foundations.

### **Rancière's Dualism: The Iron Law of Oligarchy**

Rancière illustrates the link between his two theses, on the one hand, and the originary conflict of the social, on the other, through an examination of Aristotle's famous characterization of the human being as the creature that possesses *logos*—that is, the capacity to give an account, to speak, to deliberate, to reason. The human animal is essentially an animal with language. But Rancière notes that Aristotle is not satisfied with this simple generic definition, instead choosing to enumerate species of the genus: whereas the developed adult male has full possession and

authority of the logos, “the slave is the one who participates in reason [*logos*] so far as to recognize it (*aisthêsis*) but not so as to possess it (*hexis*)” (Rancière, 1999: 17). Right inside the essential definition of the human being, which would seem to include all human beings, there is already an exclusion at work in the Aristotelian text. While all human beings have the capacity to understand and to *give an account*, Aristotle’s exclusion of the slave (as well as the woman and the child) from full humanity is achieved by *the account that is made* of their capacity to give an account. The universality of the logos is split from within.

For Rancière, this exclusion lies at the heart of all police orders, whose *modus operandi* is to police bodies into their place by excluding them from the right to assert their equality in speech. Political action thematizes this “fundamental conflict”—between those who claim the right to command and those who are forced to submit—by naming it (Rancière, 1999: 22). Rancière writes:

“the people” is the name, the form of subjectification, of this immemorial and perennial wrong through which the social order is symbolized by dooming the majority of speaking beings to the night of silence or to the animal noise of voices expressing pleasure or pain (Rancière, 1999: 22).

From out of the originary structure of the logos, then, there are two necessary “processes” (Rancière, 1999: 30, 34) or “logics” (Rancière, 1999: 28, 32-33) at work, which are set against each other in an interminable conflict. On the one hand, there is the poetic invention of an inegalitarian fiction (the account made of the capacity to give an account) that establishes the legitimacy of some hierarchical structure of society to the exclusion of some and the privilege of others. On the other hand, there is the simple fact that all humans have equal access to the logos despite the inegalitarian fiction that justifies exclusion.

While this logos-centric elaboration of the conflictual ground of the social is indeed a unique spin on the post-foundational perspective, there is one element that is a positive deviation from the comments of other post-foundationalist theorists: Rancière insists that the logic of

inequality will always be the animating principle of the dominant institutions of every society. Whereas Lefort, Mouffe, Laclau, Balibar, and others insist that every society is marked by a fundamental antagonism, but leave the shape of that antagonism undetermined, *Rancière insists that the wealthy and powerful necessarily dominate*. The material reality of inequality comes up against the spiritual, intellectual, or immaterial reality of equality, thus providing a dynamic in which the oppressed must perpetually struggle against a social system that is destined to oppress them. True, he does indicate that “[t]here is a worse and a better police,” and that “[o]ur situation is in every way preferable to that of the Scythian slaves,” who had their eyes gouged out to prevent them from escaping their bondage (Rancière, 1999: 30). Nonetheless, empirical improvements aside, Rancière excludes the possibility that any police order might be predominantly animated by an egalitarian impulse. Rancière believes that there will always be a conflict between the wealthy and the poor, and that the wealthy will always be on top.

Echoing Robert Michel’s (1911) notion of the “iron law of oligarchy”—which insists upon the necessity of oligarchic rule in any complex society requiring organizations for its functioning, whether nominally referred to as a “democracy” or not—Rancière articulates his foundational “logic” of inequality in a variety of manners. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) he refers to the “law of gravity” (76-80), which requires that “all bodies mindlessly hurl toward the center” (76). Just as stones hurl towards the center of the earth so too does *the material* of human bodies hurl *mindlessly* towards a centralizing power-structure that puts each body in its place, assigning it a corresponding role and way of being/thinking/doing. In *Hatred of Democracy* he puts it differently: he insists that there is a “natural order” in the world, wherein societies tend towards rule by a wealthy elite, who, in turn, utilize force and scientific knowledge in the consolidation of their privileged status (Rancière, 2014: 46). They are thereby able to establish a certain

“distribution of places and capabilities” that configures the institutions, roles, aptitudes, and ways of life available to the population (Rancière, 2014: 47). While these oligarchic forms of governance are politically instituted, contingent achievements, and thus only *appear to be natural*, Rancière is quite consistent in insisting upon the necessary place of some contingently instituted *oligarchic* order or another. In *Disagreement* (1999), he refers to any such structure of sensible reality as “the police” (28-29), and insists that “the resistance of any police order” to democratic politics “is a matter of principle” (39). That is to say: there is no such thing as a police order that does not intrinsically work against democratic politics in its very concept. Every police order, for Rancière, necessarily tends towards oligarchy and domination. Representative government is just one way in which this oligarchic police principle has been institutionalized (Rancière, 2014: 53). *How oligarchy is institutionalized varies. But the fact that it is institutionalized does not.* With this hypostatization of the iron law of oligarchy Rancière rules out in advance the possibility of a social order that is *not* predominantly animated by an oligarchic impulse, closing out the possibilities of institutional transformation in troubling ways.

But while the wealthy necessarily dominate, they must invent some fiction that justifies their privileged position and explains to the dominated the necessity of the arrangement of social relations, perhaps appealing to nature, nobility, divinity, or the *telos* of history. In this poetic act of providing a foundation to the contingently instituted authority structure, they must pragmatically presuppose the equality of intelligence of those persons whom the poetic fiction categorizes as inferior.<sup>2</sup> In order for these supposed inferiors to understand the poetic fiction that justifies the authority structure, they must have the equal linguistic capacity to make sense of the words used in the foundational fiction. “Equality must be posited if inequality is to be explained” (Rancière,

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<sup>2</sup> See Rancière’s example of the plebeian secession to the Aventine Hill in *On the Shores of Politics* (1995: 69, 82, 85) and *Disagreement* (1999: 23-27, 33).

1995: 82). Thus the inequality of the social order is ultimately grounded in the equality of intelligence implied in the structure of the *logos*. But the converse is also true, on Rancière's account:

What binds us together prior to all community, prior to any equality of intelligence, is the link that runs through all those points where the weight of things in us becomes consent, all those points where acquiescence comes to be loved as inequality and is reflected in the activities of comparing, setting up and explaining ranks... The social bond is maintained by this endless manufacture of acquiescence, which in schools is called explanation and in public assemblies and courts goes by the name of persuasion (Rancière, 1995: 83).

The condition of possibility for linguistic interaction (and its necessary equality of intelligence) is the material existence of a society. Language does not occur in isolation from the social bond, which, on Rancière's account, is necessarily inegalitarian, and necessarily bound up with an inegalitarian fiction. Thus, prior to the equality of intelligence, we are held together by the discourse of inequality, which itself presupposes the equality of intelligence.

This difficult relation between language, equality, and inequality is what Rancière refers to as the "paradox of equality" (1995: 80-84), which serves as the foundation for his vision of politics. But this "paradox" is precisely not the dialectical penetration of the subject and the object. To the contrary, Rancière insists that we must either cling to one side or to the other. Indeed, there are "but two ways of grasping hold of arbitrariness, the primary non-reason of things and of language: the egalitarian reason of the community of equals or the inegalitarian unreason of social bodies" (1995: 84). The community of equals gestures towards Rancière's notion of dissensus, which: (1) does not set equality as a goal, but instead presupposes it as a starting point; and (2) acknowledges that "the community of equals can never achieve substantial form as a social institution" (Rancière, 1995: 85). This elusive community of equals indicates people who have perceived the inegalitarian fiction for what it is, and have interpreted it differently, have appropriated the words that bind the social order together and deployed them in ways that

undermine the social bond. But as soon as they attempt to give equality some substantial form in concrete institutions of society and to create a new fiction of their own—one that would justify equality rather than inequality—Rancière insists that they necessarily betray their own cause.

No matter how many individuals become emancipated, society can never be emancipated. Equality may be the law of the community, but society inevitably remains in thrall to inequality... A community of equals can never become coextensive with a society of the unequal, but nor can either exist without the other. They are as mutually exclusive in their principles as they are mutually reinforcing in their existence (Rancière, 1995: 84).

Rancière's dualistic ontology comes down to the necessity of both *material* inequality (of the social bond) and *immaterial* equality (of intelligence).

In light of this ontology, Rancière's seemingly "paradoxical" formulation of the political subject makes much more sense. Consider the formulation he provides in his attack on Hannah Arendt: "the Rights of Man are the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not" (Rancière, 2010: 75). This statement is merely a reassertion of the *dual reality* of both equality and inequality. The person who *does not have the rights that they have* points to the material reality of the unequal distribution of social bodies, the merely formal rights that are not actualized in the necessarily oligarchic social order. The person who *has the rights that they do not have* points to the immaterial reality of the equality between speaking beings, the equality between anyone and everyone that is presupposed and enacted in the face of that unequal social reality.

### **Is Another World Possible?**

An important question here would be: how do we transform the durable, material institutions of the police order along egalitarian lines. Unfortunately, Rancière exhibits uninhibited contempt towards any speculation as to how contemporary institutions of governance might be reformed along more egalitarian lines. For instance, he describes participatory democratic theory

as a “mongrel idea” caught in the tension between reform and revolution—an idea that assigns “to enduring democracy, as its site of exercise, the mere filling of spaces left empty by power” (Rancière, 1995: 60). Against this “mongrel idea” of “enduring democracy,” Rancière suggests that the real “permanence” of democracy lies in its “mobility, its capacity to shift the sites and forms of participation” (1995: 60). That is to say, democracy is only permanent insofar as it is not permanent, insofar as it is not hemmed in by institutional forms that fix it to a place, a role, and a mode of practice.

But such institutionalization of democracy in the police order is precisely what was achieved in Rancière’s paradigmatic instances of politics in Athens and Rome. Theorists and practitioners of participatory democracy rightly look to these ancient exemplars for inspiration in imagining new political institutions. But given Rancière’s nomenclature, this “mongrel idea” of participatory democracy would merely refer to a better police order, one that seeks to fix some forms and sites of democratic participation. Any talk of positively transforming the institutions of governance is discounted from the outset as mere policing. But why should we let differences in word choice block an entire field of research from view? Call it a mongrel idea, call it the police, call it whatever you like; just because it does not count as what Rancière refers to as “politics” does not mean that we should so disdainfully dismiss such alternative institutional possibilities out of hand. Participatory democratic theory,<sup>3</sup> participatory economics,<sup>4</sup> participatory budgeting,<sup>5</sup> practices of worker self-management,<sup>6</sup> alternative forms of property law and resource

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Pateman (1970), C.B. Macpherson (1977), Archon Fung & Erik Olin Wright (2003), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2005), Gianpaolo Baiocchi & Ernesto Ganuza (2016), Michael Menser (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Albert & Robin Hahnel (1991), Michael Albert (2004), Robin Hahnel (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Neara Abers (2000), Gianpaolo Baiocchi (2005), Benjamin Goldfrank & Aaron Schneider (2006), Brian Wampler (2010, 2015), Luis Armando Gandin (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Francisco Javier Forcadell (2005), David Schweickart (2002).



management,<sup>7</sup> institutions of democratic confederalism,<sup>8</sup> and movements for food sovereignty and agrarian reform<sup>9</sup> are possible ways of thinking about transforming the institutional structures and everyday practices of governance (or “policing”, if you prefer). There are myriad other possibilities not mentioned here. But a true adherent to Rancière’s theoretical framework would refuse to consider such institutional trajectories, such “mongrel ideas.” Once you start talking about institutions, you are already talking about police, which is identified as necessarily oligarchical. For Rancière, the question of institutions is off the table.

Consider his discussion of an 1833 strike by the tailors of Paris. One component of the strike was the creation of a workshop that was managed by the workers themselves. But, according to Rancière, this should be taken “less as a germ of some ‘workers’ power’ to come than as an extension of the republican principle to a realm still foreign to it, namely the workshop. Perhaps after all there is no need for the workers to own their own factory and run it themselves in order to be equal. Perhaps it is enough for them to show, when appropriate, that they *can* do so” (Rancière, 1995: 49). Rancière goes on to insist that this instance of worker self-management should be seen merely as a temporary demonstration of a “capacity” rather than as the foundation of some sort of “counterpower susceptible of governing a future society” (ibid.). While Rancière exhibits a suspicion towards the possibility of the institutionalization of worker self-management and worker ownership of the workplace, he displays an admiration for the prospect of an untransformed “republican principle” being extended to a new realm. In his identification of governance with the (in his view) necessarily oligarchical structure of society, even worker self-governance is seen as

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<sup>7</sup> Carol Gould (1980).

<sup>8</sup> Murray Bookchin (1982), Abdullah Öcalan (2015a, 2015b) Michael Knapp, Ercan Ayboga & Anja Flach (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Sam Moyo & Paris Yeros (eds.) (2005), Michael Menser (2008), Hannah Wittman (2009), Wendy Wolford (2010), Peter André et al. (2014), Philip McMichael (2014), Amy Trauger (2014), Leandro Vergara-Camus (2014), Miguel Carter (ed.) (2015).

a dangerous possibility, as something that might be “susceptible” of establishing a new form of society.

Rancière’s disempowering dualism of dissensus is translated concretely in political life as a kind of fatalism wherein political actors, insofar as they presuppose Rancière’s understanding of politics, succumb to a belief that liberal democracy cannot be radically transformed. As Rancière himself says of the emancipated person in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*: “He knows what he can expect of the social order [i.e., inequality and oligarchy] and will not make a big to-do about it” (Rancière, 1991: 109). The emancipated person is the lucky fellow able to “scrupulously obey superiors that he knows are his equal” (ibid). For Rancière, it seems to be enough that the oppressed know they are equal in intelligence to their oppressors. These comments appear in a section of text where Rancière argues that it is *impossible* to institutionalize the pedagogical method of Joseph Jacotot (a method that was in fact concretely practiced by Jacotot and his followers in their classrooms, and thus already institutionalized on a small scale).<sup>10</sup> The practical presupposition of their pedagogical method—the universal equality of intelligence of all human beings—serves as the foundation of Rancière’s entire theoretical edifice. Though, Rancière insists that neither Jacotot’s method nor its practical presupposition are capable of being instituted (Rancière 1991: 101-139). That is to say, Rancière asserts the necessity of the universal equality of intelligence, but also asserts that this equality is necessarily immaterial, that it cannot be embodied in durable institutions of education or of governance. Accompanied by this conviction is Rancière’s steadfast refusal to consider institutional innovations that would move beyond the structures of liberal democracy and global capitalism, his derisive attitude toward any theorists who speak about the

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed look at Jacotot’s method as it was practiced during the 19<sup>th</sup> century at various educational institutions across Europe, see John Tourrier’s *Intellectual Emancipation: A Treatise on Jacotot’s Method of Universal Instruction* (1830 [reprinted by Scholar’s Choice Publisher in 2015]).

concrete possibilities of institutional transformation, and his insistence that all forms of governance are necessarily dominated by an inegalitarian impulse. Rancière's *faith* in the necessary status of oligarchy and the necessarily immaterial status of equality do not inspire political action. To the contrary, they inspire fatalism and encourage a surrender to the status quo. To the extent that Rancière's conceptual distinctions are gaining wide purchase across academic disciplines, the emancipatory imagination is being considerably hemmed in within those fields of inquiry. Rancière's followers, after all, know what to expect from the police order, and they "will not make a big to-do about it" (1991: 109).

### **Rancière's Two Senses of Equality and the Reification of Liberalism**

Although I have not thematized it above, Rancière constantly wavers between two forms of equality which he describes as the presupposition or starting point of all political action. On the one hand is the universal equality of intelligence, which I have discussed at length above. On the other hand is the contingently inscribed forms of equality that are concretely leveraged in political struggles; for instance, universal human rights inscribed in the foundational texts of modern nation-states. He tends towards the former (ahistorical universal structure) when articulating his *theoretical form*, most notably through his use/abuse of ancient exemplars. He tends towards the latter (historically constituted universal) when filling in the structure of his theoretical scaffolding with the *empirical content* of contemporary instances of politics, all of which seem to presuppose the form of equality that is contingently inscribed in the founding texts of modern nation-states.

Rancière's notion of an ahistorical equality inherent in the very structure of human language is derived from his encounter with the texts of certain figures of the European Enlightenment and anachronistically imposed upon his representation of Athens and Rome. When representing the plebeians in *Disagreement* (1999), Rancière does not examine the extant record

of the historical struggle between the plebeians and patricians (a struggle that lasted centuries and involved the ongoing construction of new institutions of governance through which the plebeians achieved a formal institutional place that was fixed in the political order). Instead, Rancière offers up Pierre-Simon Ballanche's "rewriting of the tale told by Livy" (Rancière, 1999: 23). This "rewriting" was published in 1829 under the heading of a "*General formula* of the history of all peoples *applied to* the history of the Roman people" (ibid, italics added). Mimicking Ballanche and his "general formula," Rancière establishes his own universal theory, and then *applies it* to ancient Athens, ancient Rome, and modern instances of political action. But these two moments—the construction of a universal theory, followed by its application to particular cases—are occluded from view by the style of "rewriting" history that Rancière adopts from Ballanche. Indeed, the *application* of the theory to the particular case and the *elaboration* of the theory in general occur simultaneously in the rewriting of particular histories, lending a sense of deep historical sensitivity to a theory that is anything but.

This method asserts an astonishing uniformity in the form of political action from ancient Athens to the present. As Rancière puts it: "What makes an action political is not its object or the place where it is carried out, but solely its form" (Rancière, 1999: 32). This formalism inevitably leads to distortions of the empirical content examined, which is made to conform to the theoretical form that has been posited as an ahistorical universal. At least two negative effects follow. First, and most obviously, Rancière's theoretical framework necessarily ignores the vast diversity of forms of protest, structures of governance, ways of life, and discourses of equality that have contributed to the myriad instances in which political action has successfully transformed the material conditions of human coexistence throughout history. Specifically, Rancière completely excludes the work of institutional transformation from the scope of his inquiry; and in fact, he,

positively denigrates such work as necessarily subject to the inegalitarian logic of the police order. Secondly, and perhaps more perniciously, given the fact that Rancière's account of political action is cast in ahistorical terms, at the level of form it is rendered incredibly rigid; when this rigid form is filled in with empirical instances of politics that are overwhelmingly represented as mere appeals to the abstract right of the bourgeois state, that empirical content is itself hypostatized as a necessary, ahistorical universal, eliminating from view a path through which political action might transform the liberal world order in the direction of a more egalitarian configuration.

This framework traps Rancière and his acolytes within a form of immanent critique that presupposes bourgeois abstract right and merely seeks to extend the unmodified logic of this republican principle to places and relations (e.g., the workshop described above) that have not yet been touched by its wholesome goodness. What Rancière describes as the “syllogism of emancipation” (Rancière, 1995: 45-52) and I am here describing as “immanent critique,” refers to the activity of criticizing empirical reality from the perspective of the dominant norms present in that reality, wherein the gap between the promises of the norm and the shortcomings of reality are highlighted. In this case, the notion of “universal” equality—as codified in *particular* forms in the founding texts and the juridical institutions of modern states—is taken as the concept that is marshaled in a critique of material conditions. The gap between the formal promises of equality and the concrete conditions that contradict those promises is thematized in the effort to ameliorate the violations of the formal equality guaranteed by law.

This is the sense in which Rancière insists that politics is necessarily entangled with the police, always acting “in the places and with the words that are common to both [the police order and to political action], even if it means reshaping those places and changing the status of those words” (Rancière, 1999: 33). This is certainly an effective form of political action that has achieved

many important victories for all manner of political actors. Nonetheless, the rigidity of Rancière's theoretical framework and the narrowness of its content prevent him from perceiving or imagining political action that would transform either the prevailing political institutions or the form of equality that would subsequently be presupposed in future practices of immanent critique.

Rancière's account of politics ascribes to political actors the presupposition of two distinct forms of equality: the contingent, empirically inscribed equality of the police order; and the ontological, universal equality of the logos. Of course, it is unlikely that every political actor in all of history *consciously* presupposed Rancière's idiosyncratic account of the universal equality of intelligence. Indeed, given Rancière's view of language—which insists that each act of understanding is a hermeneutic appropriation that singularly invests words with meaning from out of the context of an entire life of experience—it is flatly *impossible* for the same concept of equality to be consciously presupposed in every political action. If Rancière's originary equality of the logos is presupposed in every political action, it must be a pragmatic presupposition rather than a conscious one. This pragmatic presupposition would be visible *from the viewpoint of philosophy*, but would not be present to the consciousness of political actors who had not read Rancière's texts.

Nonetheless, Rancière frequently ascribes his ontological equality as the conscious presupposition of political actors throughout history. For instance, take his account of Blanqui, the legendary revolutionary of 19<sup>th</sup> century France. When Blanqui is brought to trial in 1832, the magistrate asks him to name his profession so that it can be inscribed in the court records. Blanqui replies that he is a “proletarian.” When the magistrate objects to this response and asserts that this is not a profession, Blanqui declares “It is the profession of thirty million Frenchmen who live off their labor and who are deprived of political rights” (Rancière, 1999: 37). In reference to this declaration, Rancière claims: “What is subjectified is neither work nor destitution, but the simple

counting of the uncounted, the difference between an inegalitarian distribution of social bodies and the equality of speaking beings” (1999: 38). While this neatly fits Rancière’s theoretical framework, wherein the equality of intelligence is lurking behind every speech act and waiting to encounter the police order in dissensual glory, on Rancière’s own account Blanqui does not reference the equality of intelligence. To the contrary, he contrasts the inegalitarian distribution of bodies in the police order with that very police order’s own promise to equality: the proletarians are “deprived of political rights” (ibid). It is the formally inscribed equality of citizens in respect to political rights that is presupposed in Blanqui’s dissensual action, not Rancière’s ontological equality. Thus, Blanqui’s action does match up with Rancière’s characterization of politics as always entangled with the police and always borrowing the words and phrases that are already inscribed in the police order. Why, then, does Rancière attribute the equality of speaking beings to Blanqui in his “rewriting” of Blanqui’s political action?

Perhaps we can disentangle the intentionality of the political actors Rancière portrays from the intentionality of the political theorist who Rancière in fact is. I contend that Rancière’s practice of rewriting history from the point of view of his ontological equality reflects his will to lay his own foundational fiction. The problem lies in the fact that Rancière’s dualistic ontology inculcates the disempowering belief in: (1) the necessity of oligarchy and material inequality; and (2) the necessarily immaterial nature of equality. *These two theses on politics do not inspire action.*

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