

Introducing Disagreement

Rancière's Anti-Sociology and the Parallax of Political Subjectivity and Political Economy (of Racism)

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The sociology of “misrecognition” [...] share[s] with Althusserianism the idea that the dominated are dominated because they are ignorant of the laws of domination. This simplistic view at first assigns to those who adopt it the exalted task of bringing their science to the blind masses. Eventually, though, this exalted task dissolves into a pure thought of resentment which declares the inability of the ignorant to be cured of their illusions, and hence the inability of the masses to take charge of their own destiny.

RANCIÈRE, *ALTHUSSER'S LESSON XVI*

In *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (1999) Jacques Rancière introduced the polemical notion of “the police” [*la police*] to refer to “the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution” (28). Curiously, for Rancière sociology as such – rather than dissecting “the police” and thus underwriting emancipation – is part and parcel of a non-egalitarian “distribution of the sensible” [*partage du sensible*] secured by *la police*. In other words: Sociology is a disciplinary knowledge and practice that eventually amounts to the policing of subjectivities rather than emancipatory social

transformation. “Politics,” by contrast, is “an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration” (29-30). Accordingly, “politics” is not a matter of negotiating conflicting interests, nor the exercise of power or its institutionalization. Rather, it is a matter of what the excluded and disenfranchised [*les sans-part*] do that interrupts the hierarchical order of the social; in the process, they constitute a political subject (“the *demos*,” “the people,” “the proletariat,” but also “women,” “black people,” “the 99%,” “the *sans-papiers*,” etc.). Political subjects disrupt not only the power arrangements of the social order, but also its perceptual and epistemic underpinnings, the obviousness and naturalness that attaches to it. Rancière’s notion of “politics” is thus well suited to contest a post-political social formation, brought about by neoliberal capitalism and “end-of-history” teleologies, that presents itself as non-ideological, non-antagonistic, and permanent, where “consensus” has come to mean the eclipse of an identity constituted through polemicizing over the common. In other words: the disavowal of historical contingency and the “disagreement” [*la mésentente*] constitutive of politics (cf. 43 ff.).

But Rancière’s polemical critique of “the police” and his rethinking of politics as a performative contradiction has also led him to reject the concept of power *tout court*:

What makes an action political is not its object or the place where it is carried out, but solely its form, the form in which confirmation of equality is inscribed in the setting up of a dispute, of a community existing solely through being divided. Politics runs up against the police everywhere. We need to think of this encounter as a meeting of the heterogeneous. To be able to do this *we have to let go of certain concepts that assert in advance a smooth connection between them. The concept of power is the main such concept.* This concept once allowed a certain well-meaning militancy to contend that “everything is political” since power relationships are everywhere. [...] The concept of power allows one to retort with an “everything is policing” to an “everything is political,” but this is pretty poor as a logical conclusion. If everything is political, then nothing is. So while it is important to show, as Michel Foucault has done magnificently, that the police order extends well beyond its specialized institutions and techniques, it is equally important to say that nothing is political in itself merely because power relationships are at work in it. For a thing to be political, it

must give rise to a meeting of police logic and egalitarian logic that is never set up in advance. (*Disagreement* 32, my emphasis)

It is thus not difficult to see why Rancière's thinking can largely be considered antithetical to that of Pierre Bourdieu, in particular. Rancière's profound anti-sociological bias, which can be shown to rest on a deliberate Foucauldian rejection of the Marxian and Freudian dialectics of essence and appearance, can indeed be illustrated by way of his fundamental rejection of Bourdieu's relational sociology and habitus-field theory. But it also clearly invites a dialectical critique and raises numerous hard-edged questions about the nature of the relationship between "the police" and "politics," structure and agency, a critical theory of society and the prospect of its radical transformation. Whereas Marx famously stated in Vol. 3 of *Capital* that "all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided" (Marx 532), Rancière has radically distanced himself from both the critique of ideology (including commodity fetishism) and a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (cf. Ricoeur 30 ff.) toward an "approach that is more affirmative of the surface itself," where "the surface no longer hides, but becomes a scene on which the symbolic efficacy of language and discourse are demonstrated" (Arsenjuk 7). What ultimately is at stake in Rancière's anti-sociology, though, is the question of the relationship between social science and emancipation – as rightfully highlighted in a 2013 *n+1* editorial piece called "Too Much Sociology" (Saval et al.) and further discussed in Ruth Sonderegger and Jens Kastner's *Pierre Bourdieu und Jacques Rancière: Emanzipatorische Praxis denken* (2014).

Rather than reading Rancière in the light of contemporary theories of recognition, or situating his radically egalitarian philosophy – "more Jacobin than Marxist" (Žižek, "Lesson" 75) – in the traditional chasm on the Left between Marxism and anarchism, the proper historical and intellectual context for understanding the development of his thought is to be found in the post-1968 New Left milieu and its post-Althusserian rejection of Marxism as a science of revolution. Rather than being the necessary product of and strategic means for overcoming class antagonism, "politics" happens when the logic of "police" (and its agents) clashes with the logic of emancipation (and its agents), which interrupts the former's distribution of the sensible and "changes the very parameters of what is considered 'possible' in the existing constellation" (Žižek, *Ticklish Subject* 199). This theoretical

proposition, then, i.e., Rancière's "ground-clearing distinction" (Davis 76) between "politics" and "police," sits uneasily with Bourdieu's insistence on the reflexive nature of symbolic power and the relationality of structure/agency sustained by a logic of praxis in the face of which the Rancièrian "disagreement" seems unlikely and "politics" itself becomes unthinkable. In other words: Rancière's post-Althusserian notion of politics aims precisely at what is rendered impossible in the given post-political conjuncture and affirms the possibility of both intellectual and political emancipation conceived as a "dissensual" rupture of a non-egalitarian and thus always-already *policed* "distribution of the sensible." Since the latter is a key concept in Rancière's work that is also somewhat reminiscent of Bourdieu's notion of "symbolic violence" and the "*paradox of doxa*" in *Pascalian Meditations* (164 ff.) and *Masculine Domination* (1-2), for instance, it seems conducive to systematically highlight and explicate Rancière's theoretical departure from and polemical dismissal of Bourdieu and related thinkers.

DISTRIBUTIONS OF THE SENSIBLE

Partage du sensible is a challenging concept which has variously been translated as "partition," "division," or "distribution" of the sensible, where "sensible" signifies both what is available to the "senses" and thus perceptible and what makes "sense" within a hegemonic regime of signification and meaning. The term refers at once to the conditions for sharing that are constitutive of a given sense and order of the community and to the sources of disruption, or "dissensus," of that same order. As Rancière has acknowledged, the concept is reminiscent of the Kantian transcendental argument or critique – "re-examined perhaps by Foucault" – of conditions of possibility or "*a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience" (*Politics* 13). Most importantly, it does not rely on the concept of "misrecognition" [*méconnaissance*] on the part of the dominated, or the *sans-part*. Key to understanding Rancière's intellectual project, moreover, is his singular understanding of emancipation as a kind of 'pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps' and the enactment of unconditional equality in the here and now, which from the perspective of the sociologist may well appear impossible. This holds true for the possibility of both politics and aesthetic

experience proper. It is thus no coincidence that Rancière also theorizes what ties aesthetics to politics and that he politicizes the terminological foundations of Kantian aesthetics in order to highlight the aesthetic dimension inherent to political subjectivization (cf. *The Philosopher and His Poor*, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, *The Emancipated Spectator*). But why, again, is sociology to be rejected?

As Caroline Pelletier puts it, Rancière “targets an often-noted tension in Bourdieu’s work between the denunciation of domination and the modelling of its ineluctable reproduction” (138). While the absence of an account of political agency is commonly described as a limitation of Bourdieu’s work, Rancière “sees in this the truth of Bourdieu’s entire discourse, [...] which places the poor in one position in society, and the sociologist in another; in which the poor are objects of study rather than intellectual and political subjects” (138). Rancière thus identifies a disavowed continuity between Althusser and Bourdieu, a continuity which Bourdieu himself firmly rejected in *Pascalian Meditations*. Rancière’s egalitarian rejection of any tendency toward (not just) sociological orthodoxy, on the other hand, already motivated his ferocious critical examination of its most dogmatic example in the wake of Paris 1968: “Althusserian structuralist Marxism with its rigid distinction between scientific theory and ideology and its distrust towards any form of spontaneous popular movement which was immediately decried as a form of bourgeois humanism” (Žižek, “Lesson” 69). Rancière’s theoretical intervention into this schema, however, is not grounded in a rejection of Marxism *tout court* but in a rejection of a particular discursive employment of academic Marxism and especially structural Marxism as a kind of master knowledge which, according to Rancière, not only runs counter to the idea of workers’ intellectual emancipation but performatively reinscribes, or reinstalls, and thus helps to reproduce some of the very hierarchies it purports to abolish – the dividing lines between worker and bourgeois, manual and intellectual labor, unrefined and refined senses, incapacity for critical reflection and capacity for critical reflection.¹

1 Cf. *Althusser’s Lesson*; *The Philosopher and His Poor*; *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Rancière’s critique of sociological mastery and the question of ‘performativity’ in relation to Judith Butler’s use of the term are cogently discussed in Pelletier. For a critical survey, see Davis 15-25.

This type of criticism of performative reinscription is characteristic of Rancière's approach to a number of highly influential critical sociologies, chief among which is the work of Bourdieu. More recently, he has tackled Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's analysis of "network-based organization, employee autonomy, and post-Fordist horizontal work structures" in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2006, back cover). As Rancière argues in *The Emancipated Spectator*, their work is perfectly in line with Bourdieu's teaching in that it

[makes] do with attributing the struggle against misery and for community bonds to workers and the individualist desire for autonomous creativity to the fleetingly rebellious children of the big or petty bourgeoisie. But the collective struggle for working-class emancipation has never been separate from a new experience of individual existence and capacities, wrested from the constraint of old bonds of community. (35)

Social emancipation, Rancière argues, is "simultaneously an aesthetic emancipation, [...] a break with the ways of feeling, seeing and saying that characterized working-class identity" in a hierarchical order (35). In his essay on "The Misadventures of Critical Thought" Rancière thus locates the "solidarity of the social and the aesthetic, the discovery of individuality for all and the project of free collectivity [...] at the heart of working-class emancipation," while insisting that "by the same token it signified the disordering of classes and identities that the sociological view of the world has always rejected, against which it was itself constructed in the nineteenth century" and which it naturally rediscovered "in the slogans of 1968" (*Emancipated Spectator* 35). It is therefore

neither the novelty nor the strength of the thesis that has proved seductive, but the way in which it puts the 'critical' theme of the complicit illusion back to work. It thus provides fuel for the melancholic version of leftism, which feeds off the dual denunciation of the power of the beast and the illusions of those who serve it when they think they are fighting it. It is true that the thesis of the recuperation of 'artistic' revolts leads to several conclusions: on occasion, it underpins proposals for a radicalism that would at last be radical: the mass defection of the forces of the General Intellect, today absorbed by Capital and the State, advocated by Paolo Virno; or the virtual subversion counter-posed to virtual capitalism by Brian Holmes. It also fuels

proposals for an inverted activism, aimed no longer at destroying but at saving a capitalism that has lost its spirit. But its normal pitch is disenchanted registration of the impossibility of changing the ways of a world that lacks any solid point for opposing the reality of domination [...]. (36-37)

Again, Rancière's main opposition to Western Marxist sociology rests on his axiomatic notion of equality and the assumed effects of pseudo-radical academic discourse. Critical social science and its thesis of recuperation may well end up reinscribing – by way of ideologically functional discursive emplotment – the (logic of the) social division of labor. In other words: The concept and analysis of recuperation can itself be recuperated into power.

But Rancière, who is himself a critic of recuperation, goes further than this when he asserts that

[t]he dominated do not remain in subordination because they misunderstand the existing state of affairs but because they lack confidence in their capacity to transform it. [...] The feeling of such a capacity presupposes that the dominated are already committed to a political process in a bid to change the configuration of sensory givens and to construct forms of a world to come, from within the existent world. (*Aesthetics* 45)

It is such undialectical humanist affirmation that ultimately risks trapping Rancière's thinking in a kind of de facto standpoint theory, unless we also read his work as expressing a Kantian, or Lacanian, insistence on the real/Real of appearances, disavowed by sociology at large. As he argues in *The Emancipated Spectator*,

[t]he current disconnection between the critical procedures and any perspective of emancipation only reveals the disjunction at the heart of the critical paradigm. *It may make fun of its illusions but it remains enclosed in its logic.* This is why I think it is necessary to re-examine the genealogy of the concepts and procedures of that logic and the way in which it got intertwined with the logic of social emancipation. (42, my emphasis)

A potential Lacanian point to be made against the sociology of “misrecognition” and symbolic power would be that such “illusions” are, of course,

never mere illusions but necessary material-symbolic fictions that structure (or, with Kant, “schematize” the perception of) reality itself, which in turn – and against Rancière – may come to assert itself as part and parcel of the problem of social domination.

What is of crucial importance according to Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Rancière, though, is the realization that “these poetic displacements and condensations are not just secondary illustrations of an underlying ideological struggle, but the very terrain of this struggle” (“Lesson” 77). Thus, if Rancière’s “police” focuses on the policing of subjects and subjectivities, on “the clear categorization of every individual, of every ‘visible’ social unit,” Žižek argues, “then disturbing such orders of the visible, the sensible, the perceptible, and proposing different lateral links, unexpected short-circuits, etc., is the elementary form of resistance” (77). Žižek thus aligns Rancière’s “police” with his Lacanian-Marxist notion of ideology. For him, ideology operates as a social fantasy which structures reality itself (cf. *Sublime Object* 29 ff.), and the task of ideology critique is to read the social symptomatically in order to drag “the unconditional Real of global Capital” into the realm of the Symbolic (*Ticklish Subject* 4, cf. Fink 70-72).

THE SOCIOLOGY OF MISRECOGNITION AND THE SCIENCE OF REPRODUCTION: BOURDIEU AND ALTHUSSER

Rancière’s critique of a Western Marxist sociology of neoliberal recuperation (esp. of cherished New Left ideas and practices) seems all the more remarkable in light of the fact that he himself had contributed an important section to *Reading Capital* in 1965, in which he exercised his fidelity to Althusserian Marxism and political-economic “symptomatic reading” in the cause of the “epistemological break” (cf. Davis 8-15). But this was before he forcefully critiqued his former teacher and collaborator in *La Leçon d’Althusser* (1974) and entered on a series of archival projects, including *The Nights of Labor* (1981), *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983), and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), which basically reversed Althusserian Marxism and scientism, focusing on social history and workers’ struggles instead. Anthony Iles and Tom Roberts thus argue that his greatest contribution is to social history.

Henceforth, Rancière follows, in the most minute detail, the mediations which surround the subaltern subject, the proletarian or worker. The problem of theory, of Marxist science and the condescension of the intellectual to his subject, is raised to a general principle traceable back from the perspective of the present through the entire history of the left.

While Althusser strictly opposed any spontaneous understanding of the social as necessarily fetishistic, “Rancière has explored the consequences of the opposite presumption—that everyone is immediately and equally capable of thought. [...] Everyone shares equal powers of speech and thought.” (Hallward 109) Rancière’s axiomatic account of equality thus strictly refuses to posit equality and emancipation as *telos*, in which case it could be endlessly deferred. Instead, for him, equality is a polemical *a priori* to be demonstrated both intellectually and practically qua politics: “[E]quality is not a goal to be attained but a point of departure, a supposition to be maintained in all circumstances” (*Ignorant Schoolmaster* 138).

Nowhere is this idea articulated more forcefully than in Rancière’s scathing response to Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979). Rancière essentially argues that Bourdieu’s sociology of art and aesthetic experience hinges on the systematic exclusion of the ‘gray area’ of aisthesis:

The sociologist needs only to show each time the sufficient reason organizing the universe of judgements—simple distinction. He only needs to widen the distance. Questions about music without music, fictitious questions of aesthetics about photographs that are not perceived as aesthetic, all these produce inevitably what is required by the sociologist: the suppression of intermediaries, of points of meeting and exchange between the people of reproduction and the élite of distinction. Everything happens as if the science of the sociologist-king had the same requirement as the city of the philosopher-king. There must be no mixing, no imitation. The subjects of this science, like the warriors of *The Republic*, must be unable to “imitate” anything else than their own dye. (*Philosopher* 189)

Contrary to Bourdieu’s wholesale rejection of Kantian aesthetics as “the site *par excellence* of the ‘denegation of the social’” (*Aesthetics* 1), Rancière seeks to lay bare again and reaffirm the emancipatory kernel of aesthetics. For instance, he reminds us that Horkheimer and Adorno’s

“profound motif” of denouncing the separation of labor and enjoyment goes further back than the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism and ‘bourgeois’ Enlightenment thought: “Through the intermediary of Hölderlinian poetry, it harks to that which is without a doubt the veritable founding text of the modern thought of emancipation, Friedrich von Schiller’s *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen [in einer Reihe von Briefen]*” (*Chronicles* 27). Rancière repeatedly refers to Schiller’s *Letters* as the founding text of aesthetic politics, precisely because Schiller counterposes “[t]o the established social division between the barbarism of the civilization of the Great and popular savagery [...] that chance at common humanity—at reconciliation in the sensory world—constituted by beauty” (27). However, in contrast to Schiller’s transcendental *homo ludens*, Rancière understands the Kantian “free play” (102 ff.) between the cognitive powers of imagination and understanding (i.e., the autonomy of aesthetic experience) to be “free” only insofar as it reveals the contingency of “the police” and its “distribution of the sensible” through the dissociation between what can be experienced – perceived, felt, done – and its *a priori* (dominant social) signification.

The “bold move” in *The Philosopher and His Poor*, as noted by Oliver Davis, is Rancière’s “insinuation, by suggestive juxtaposition, [...] that the scientific strand identified within the Marxist tradition [...] is rooted in a certain conception of the relationship between power and knowledge first elaborated in Plato’s autocratic model of the ideal city in *Republic*” (17-18). Davis further argues that “[t]he value to Rancière of Plato’s discussion in *Republic* lies in the way in which Plato, by introducing the myth of the three metals, admits to the arbitrariness [or rather contingency] of the distinction between those rulers capable of philosophy and the multitude of their ‘poor’ [...]” (20). In Rancière’s “argument by parataxis,” Marx, Sartre, and Bourdieu become “tainted by association” with Plato (20). All four have in common the construction of a group Rancière calls “the poor,” who are held to be constitutively incapable of thought, aesthetic experience, and historical agency.

Following Charlotte Nordmann, Davis acknowledges that “Rancière somewhat overstates the case against Bourdieu” (23), not to mention Marx and Sartre. In any case, “Rancière’s reaction against the sociologist’s institutional self-interest is extreme and unforgiving” (102). Davis thus summarizes Rancière’s “composite objection to Bourdieu’s approach” (23) as follows:

[H]is sociology is unduly suspicious, scientific, self-aggrandizing, reductive, deterministic and practically (politically) ineffectual. It is suspicious and scientific because it assumes, as Althusser did, that social mechanisms are hidden and accessible only to scientific analysis by sociologists and that surface manifestations are unreliable; it is institutionally self-aggrandizing because only sociologists are thought capable of such analysis, as opposed, in particular, to philosophers; it is reductive because it suppresses mixity of, and exchange between, high and low cultures and between oppressed and oppressors [...]; it is deterministic because it assumes that social milieu determines taste, thought, feeling and potential and thus, surprisingly given its progressive reputation, it renews Plato's autocratic and hereditary model of a society in which [...] individuals stay put in the places into which they have been born. Finally, it is practically (politically) ineffective because it is 'depressing', a diagnosis of social injustice which sees this as so powerful and all-encompassing as to be beyond the redress for which the analysis ostensibly calls. (23)

Not accepting "Bourdieu's display of self-awareness as mitigation for the untenable paradox of his institutional position" (24) and his critique of elitism, Rancière considers Bourdieu's work a "sophisticated scam which preserves pedagogical privilege and inequality by purporting to analyse it" (24-25). In his own words (with reference to Bourdieu and Passeron's *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*): "What can one do with a science of the school that says pedagogy is impossible? With a science of relations of power that says these are infrangible?" (*Philosopher* 180). What is at stake in this legitimate polemics, again, is the relationship between social science and emancipation.

The symbolic struggles of the distinguished élite escape the non-sense of pure competition because they define themselves as separate from the primary economy of a people affected solely by the movement upon itself of Parmenidian Marxism, by the eternal reproduction of the relations of production. An infra-world of the pure adhesion of the popular body to itself, with no other possible judgment than a love of fate which resembles fate, and with no other thinkable symbolic than marks of virility—that is to say, of reproduction. What distinguishes this generalized capitalism is therefore its Marxist unconscious: a "class struggle" functioning only at the price of not leaving to the classes a point where they could ever meet. (195)

While Rancière's anti-sociological bias and extraordinary faith in the performative side-effects of sociological discourse must be considered problematic, his polemics against the very lack of a political conception of emancipation not only in Bourdieu's sociology but in what he terms "Parmenidian Marxism" is compelling, at least from the point of view of a theory of politics.

Rather than relying, in Althusser's terms, on the power of ideological state apparatuses (ISA) to interpellate individuals into subject positions and thus reproduce the relations of production, Rancière insists that "what guarantees that appearances remain as they are is the power of circulation itself; the 'police' want us to continue to see things as we are accustomed to seeing them," to operate, in other words, with the same ideo-affective standards of perception and signification that are already in place (Panagia 299; cf. Rancière, "Dissensus" 37-40). Following Davide Panagia, it can be argued that Rancière's "disagreement" (*mésentente*) is nothing less than a performative "interruption of the indexical competence of human knowledge [and] disruption in the correspondences between perception and signification" that would amount to a social and aesthetic de-classification (300). A de-classification, that is, which would radically (self-)transform the habitus of the *sans-part* but without, as it were, a change of field. This is also why aesthetic appropriation is crucial to Rancière's idea of (the logic of) revolt and emancipation. To put it crudely, Bourdieusian sociological analysis of symbolic violence and distinction is itself a mode/part of symbolic violence and distinction, the science of social domination is itself a mode/part of social domination. For in its reliance on the epistemology of "misrecognition" (*méconnaissance*) it reinscribes discursively and thus helps reproduce the social division of labor.

ANTI-BLACK "POLICE": DEPOLITICIZATION AND STATE RACISM

It is tempting to use Rancièrian key concepts to theorize race and racism in terms of an anti-black "distribution of the sensible" and anti-black "police," which at least would have the benefit of avoiding the quasi-essentializing notions of (anti-)blackness and (critical) whiteness. But what exactly is at stake in this theoretical war of maneuver? For Rancière, the 'dominant

ideology' today (although he never uses the term explicitly) can be said to be one of depoliticization (or saturation). The suturing logic of "the police" aims at a *de facto* positivization of the entire social sphere. And we may add that this kind of consensual police "distribution" is fundamentally aligned with the needs of global capital, which can always return to or reinvent new forms of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 159-65), and with the power of race-making institutions from slavery and apartheid to the (hyper-)ghetto and the prison. In the United States, what Loïc Wacquant has called the "neoliberal government of social insecurity" has severely weakened the "Left hand" and greatly empowered the "Right hand" of the state in order to "regulate" the effects of economic deregulation and welfare state retrenchment by way of "wedding restrictive 'workfare' and expansive 'prisonfare'" (287).

In the face of these developments, a sociological analysis of "symbolic power" is increasingly rendered obsolete by drastic austerity measures, state repression, and police violence. The neoliberal state's increasingly authoritarian response to poverty and economic crisis particularly affects racialized surplus populations and undocumented workers, and specifically Blacks and Latinos in the United States. Here, Joshua Clover's historical materialist theory of the dialectical relation between labor strikes and riots and its significance for "the new era of uprisings" – from Watts, Newark, Detroit to Oakland, Ferguson, Baltimore and beyond – puts a spotlight on the interaction of class domination and racism by asking how we are to think the racialization of the riot (especially in the U.S.), thus focusing on what is, in fact, a global problem of racialized surplus populations – from laid-off workers and prison populations (not just) in the Global North to refugees and slum dwellers (not just) in the Global South (cf. Clover 153-74). Judging from the perspective of the *longue durée*, it seems mistaken to even try to disentangle race and class relations, unless both race and class are understood merely in a vulgar sociological or culturalist sense. Rather, as Stuart Hall put it in 1980, "race" appears to be "the modality in which class is 'lived'" (341). *Mutatis mutandis*, it should be considered reductive, if not outright racist, to identify the contemporary uprisings mentioned above as "race riots" rather than "circulation struggles" (Clover 175) of racialized surplus populations that are effectively disrupting the "police distribution" of (not just) the sensible.

It has been argued by some that Rancière's critical thinking is ignorant of race and racism, which indeed it rarely addresses due to its focus on the universality of dis-identification and disagreement. In a more recent essay, however, Rancière identifies racism as "a passion from above," focusing on the logic of the neoliberal state.

Today's racism is [...] primarily a logic of the state and not a popular passion. And this state logic is primarily supported not by who knows what backward social groups but by a substantial part of the intellectual elite. [...] The invocation of universality in fact advances its opposite: the establishment of a discretionary state power that decides who belongs and who doesn't belong to the class of those who have the right to be here; the power, in short, to confer and remove identities. That power has its correlate: the power to oblige individuals to be identifiable at all times, to keep themselves in a space of full visibility before the state. [...] A lot of energy has been spent against a certain figure of racism—embodied in the *Front National*—and a certain idea that this racism is the expression of "white trash" [...] and represents the backward layers of society. A substantial part of that energy has been recuperated to build the legitimacy of a new form of racism: state racism and "Leftist" intellectual racism. It is perhaps time to reorient our thinking and struggle against a theory and practice of stigmatization, precarization, and exclusion which today constitutes a racism from above: a logic of the state and a passion of the intelligentsia. ("Racism")

As Adolph Reed has stringently argued, it is "particularly important at this moment to recognize that the familiar taxonomy of racial difference is but one historically specific instance of a genus of ideologies of ascriptive hierarchy that stabilize capitalist social reproduction" (53). Reed notes that "entirely new race-like taxonomies could come to displace the familiar ones: For instance, the 'underclass' could become even more race-like as a distinctive, essentialized population" (53). After all, anti-racism and gender equality "are now also incorporated into the normative and programmatic structure" of a progressive neoliberalism, inasmuch as the "[r]igorous pursuit of equality of opportunity exclusively within the terms of given patterns of capitalist class relations [...] has been fully legitimized within the rubric of 'diversity'" (53).

In the face of the specifically U.S. American dilemma of anti-black racism and police, there may be more to be gained from Reed's and

Wacquant's analysis than from Rancière's, which is closely bound to the French national situation. Leaving the detailed sociological analysis of "the police" behind and assuming its logic to be more or less universal, Rancière's post-Althusserian theory polemically reclaims the notion of politics and inquires into the conditions of (im-)possibility of the emergence of a political subject. By rethinking politics exclusively from the perspective of the *sans-part*, while sidelining both the critique of ideology and the sociological analysis of modes of recuperation into power (not to mention the bracketing of Marxian critique of political economy) Rancière thus pits the sequence of desubjectification and political subjectivation constitutive of emancipatory politics against the determinations of Bourdieu's habitus-field theory and analysis of symbolic power – as he did against Althusser's account of ideological "hailing" and the material-symbolic force of ideological "interpellation." It is crucial to note, however, that Rancière does not simply reject the latter but re-conceptualizes it as a kind of non-interpellation: "Move along, there is nothing to see here!" (*Dissensus* 37). This, then, is the ultimate "consensual" rationale of *la police* (cf. Žižek, "Lesson").

THE PARALLAX OF POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Thus rejecting social science, Rancière instead provides an anti-essentialist and economically non-deterministic theory of political subjectivity, beginning with the paradoxical Marxian notion of the proletariat as a "class" that entails "the dissolution of all classes" that we find in the Young Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, noting that the emergence of a political subject proper that addresses an inaugural "wrong" (*Disagreement* 21 f.; *Politics* 84, 93) and engages in politics as "the polemical verification of equality" (*Politics* 86) is necessarily accompanied by the creation of symbolic "operators of declassification" ("Democracy" 287; also cf. *Disagreement* 35 ff.). Given Rancière's declared intention to theorize and "re-interpret class struggle from a political point of view" ("Democracy" 289), it is obvious that he avoids "the metapolitical affirmation according to which the system is endowed with a truth that has its own effectivity" (*Dissensus* 88).

In contradistinction to (Platonic) “archi-politics,” (Aristotelian) “para-politics,” and (Marxian) “meta-politics,” democratic politics proper

always comes as a kind of exception to the way in which, generally, communities are gathered, it comes as an interruption. There are factual communities, grounded in the power of birth or money, and there is politics as the process of challenging the meaning of these factual communities through the operation of declassification. (“Democracy” 291)²

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- 2 Rancière develops this idea at its most elaborate in *Disagreement*, arguing that political philosophy has conceived of these three scenarios to forestall the democratic event of politics proper (cf. 61-94). It is no coincidence that these scenarios align neatly with Rancière’s genealogy of historical regimes of the identification of art, enabling a shuttling back and forth between political theory and aesthetic theory, labor/social history and art history. The following excerpt from his 2005 interview with *Historical Materialism* clarifies Rancière’s use of Marx: “In the young Marx, there is a kind of debasement of politics, politics for him being only superstructural appearance, and the real thing being the subterranean process of class war. I tried to overturn the position by appropriating for myself the enigmatic sentence of the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* where he writes that the proletariat is a class of society that is not a class of society, and is actually a ‘class’ that entails the dissolution of all classes. The question is: what does this mean, how do you think of this class which is not a class? In the same text, Marx makes the proletariat akin to a kind of chemical or biological idea of dissolution. The proletariat is thought as the process of the decomposition of old classes. From this point on, Marxism oscillated between a negative idea of class as dissolution and a positive idea of class as identity. And, ultimately, this second sense, the proletariat as a positive class of labour, obviously became the mainstream sense of class in Marxism. I tried to put differently this process of ‘dissolution’. It is not a matter of the historical and quasi-biological decomposition of old classes. I rather think this dissolution as a symbolic function of declassing. The class that is not a class thus becomes an operator of declassification. The proletariat is no longer a part of society but is, rather, the symbolic inscription of ‘the part of those who have no part’, a supplement which separates the political community from any count of the parts of a society. *The idea of the dissolving class can thus give the concept of what constitutes a political subject*” (“Democracy” 287, my emphasis).

Rancière thus reconceptualizes class struggle “as the power of de-classification,” resisting simultaneously Marxist orthodoxies and the “replacement of the proletariat by a multiplicity of minorities” in favor of “the universality of disidentification” (289). Hence,

[w]hat is important in politics as class struggle is political subjectification, that is, not only the fact of the action of minorities, the action of groups, but the creation of what I call empty names of subjects. What was the proletariat? The proletariat was an empty name for a subject – for anyone, for counting anyone. (289)

Politics, for Rancière, creates “empty names of subjects” for counting anyone, including the *sans-part*. The collective subject of politics, identifying with the point of exclusion in a hierarchical order, thus functions as a polemical concrete universal.

From the Greek *demos* to the East German crowd’s chanting “We are *the* people!” in 1989 and the protesters on the streets of Cairo or Tunis in the “Arab spring” of 2011, “*the* people” (as opposed to the ethnic-nationalist *Volk*) has “stood for universality not because it covered the majority of the population, nor simply because it occupied the lowest place within the social hierarchy, but because *it had no proper place within this hierarchy*” (*Ticklish Subject* 224-25). It is “a site of conflicting, self-canceling determinations [...] of performative contradictions” (225) or what Rancière calls “a supernumerary subject in relation to the calculated number of groups, places, and functions in a society” (*Politics* 51). The Occupy movement’s “We are the 99 percent!” and the more recent “Black Lives Matter!” also essentially function in the same way. In both cases the solidary identification with the point of exclusion – or exploitation and oppression – in a hierarchical order, combined with the denunciation of a “wrong,” opens onto a radical universality.

The problem with such a ground-clearing post-Marxist account of ‘pure politics,’ of course, is that it sits uneasily with the Marxian emphasis on both the internal contradictions of capital accumulation and the constitutive social antagonism also known as “class struggle.” What anti-economic political theory thus fails to address is the politico-economic *form* of the social. For Žižek, however, “[t]he relationship between economy and politics is ultimately that of the well-known visual paradox of ‘two faces or a vase’: one

sees either two faces or a vase, never both—one has to make a choice” (*Parallax View* 56).

Following Žižek, Rancière’s political critique of Marxism and sociology thus needs to be “supplemented by its obverse: the field of economy is *in its very form* irreducible to politics – this level of the form of economy (of economy as the determining form of the social) is what French ‘political post-Marxists’ miss when they reduce economy to one of the positive social spheres” (56). Intertwined with this onto-epistemological “parallax,” then, are the pressing questions of what material and symbolic constraints on subjectivity and agency exist today that help reproduce a consensual post-political formation. If the “police” order’s most effective means of forestalling “politics” in our time of post-political consensus is indeed, as Rancière claims, a non-interpellation of the subject – the inverted form of Althusser’s “hey, you there!” that takes the form of the “move along, there is nothing to see!”³ – then this also implies the rather successful reproduction of said order by way of consensual discourse and social practice. In other words: an ideo-affective formation ‘securing’ the depoliticization of appearances by positing “an identity between sense and sense” (Corcoran 2). Rancière suggests to rethink this without relying on the notion of power (Bourdieu) and outside of the critique of political economy (Marx).

As Marx knew very well, though, political-economic conditions are never absolutely determining. Rather they suggest both possibilities and limits. The field of social contest is held in tension, dialectically, by both the capacity of humans to “make their own history” and circumstances “given and transmitted from the past” (329). It is because of the tension between these forces, between agency and determination, that we find multiple forms of collective action within a given conjuncture rather than moments of ‘pure’ politics. At the same time, as emphasized by Clover in his historical materialist theory of the riot, “because a given set of conditions tilts one way and not another, one among the forms of action will tend to become the leading tactic” (105).

John Roberts has further pointed out that Rancière’s “quasi-poststructuralist flight from externally ‘imposed’ notions of ‘collectivity’,

3 “The police say that there is nothing to see on the road, there is nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space of circulation is nothing other than the space of circulation” (*Chronicles* 37).

'unity', 'identity' and 'political action' may take the fight to those self-deluding forces on the left (and right) that assume such notions as unproblematically good things" (78); while Hallward argues that Rancière's "trenchant egalitarianism seems all too compatible with a certain degree of social resignation" (126). Rancière believes that politics "shatters any division between those who are deemed able and those who are not" (*Politics* 202). "But," Hallward asks, "is the old relation of theory and praxis, intellectual and worker, so easily resolved? Does political action no longer need to be informed by a detailed understanding of how the contemporary world works, how exploitation operates, how transnational corporations go about their business?" (127). Hallward's criticism of Rancière's indifference toward a theory of revolutionary practice (strategies and tactics) ends on the following note, though: "In the field of recent critical theory, there are few better illustrations of [a decisive commitment necessary to art and politics that is itself organized, unequivocal, categorical, and combative] than the consistency and resolve that have over the last three decades characterized the development of Rancière's own project" (129).

However, we may also argue that at a time when anti-black policing and murder at the hand of the state is fundamentally disavowed and primarily attributed (by a significant number of black conservatives and tea party republicans) to 'black-on-black' crime, a time when 'sociological excuses' are already under attack from the neoliberal and neoconservative Right, the belated Anglo-American academic reception and rise to fame of Rancière's egalitarian critique seems rather untimely. Even more so as those engaged in the present wave of "circulation struggles" (Clover 129) and "communization" currents are not at all 'enthralled' by Marxist scientism or sociology. As Nathan Brown writes in his critical reassessment of "the lesson" of both Althusser and Rancière:

Real history returns, and with it a renewed intensity to debates over the relation between theory and politics. But the theoretical articulation of history's real movement doesn't pass through *The Emancipated Spectator*, darling of *Artforum* and the Venice Biennale. [...] From the Red Years following May '68 to the reddening of the twenty-first century, the impasse that [*Théorie Communiste*] finds a way through, in my opinion, is precisely that which Rancière reproaches Althusser for walking into. [...] Theory] cannot 'guide' a revolutionary movement by telling the proletariat what it should have done differently or what it should do now. Theory can, however,

compare, analyse, synthesize, periodize and arrive at a tendential and *structural* account of the concrete situations in which we are historically and geographically immersed. It can do so in a way that emerges *from* particular struggles, and this can help us to situate those struggles in relation to a movement that traverses and exceeds them, a real movement that cannot be guided by ‘a general line’ or prescriptions from party philosophers. Nor will any effort to situate our struggles be aided by what Rancière has to offer: an abdication of structural analysis and a theory of politics as the unaccountable interruption of ‘a freedom that crops up and makes real the ultimate equality on which any social order rests’ [...]. This is a theory of the relation between politics and ‘the police’, as a game of whack-a-mole. (“Red Years” 23, original emphasis)

Because the critique of political economy is fundamentally “bound up with the Marxist analytic of value and valorization” (namely “the production, self-presupposition, and expanded reproduction of capital that is called ‘accumulation’”), Brown concludes (in an article for *Mute*) that “Rancière is not a Marxist.” He is right to note that “Rancière’s approach to the figure of ‘the worker,’ throughout his corpus, proceeds exclusively from the perspective of the labour process, ignoring the valorisation process.” Rancière is therefore ill-equipped to think the “distribution of the *insensible*,” the movement of valorization, and thus “misses entirely the dimension of political economy in his thinking of politics.” This, of course, is precisely the point of Rancière’s strategic anti-sociology and anti-economic theory of politics. Its general objective, as rightfully noted by Jean-Philippe Deranty, is “to bring class struggle into *logos*” (17, original emphasis) – for the sake of both ‘revolts of logic’ and the ‘logic of revolt.’

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