

# **The Political Subject and Its Experiences: An Alternative Reading of Rancière on Political Subjectivity**

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to outline a rich account of the notion of political subjectivity using the work of Jacques Rancière as its main reference. I anchor my research question on Rancière's work because he is one of the contemporary political philosophers whose theory of politics depends most significantly on a conception of the political subject. In fact, in his own theory, there is a struggle and tension about what exactly constitutes a political subject. I attempt to show that the way Rancière conceptualized his notion of political subjectivity, including its hesitations, provides invaluable material for reflection on how we should understand politics at present and on how we should think of our specific roles as political subjects. I suggest a reading of Rancière that is focused on the "experiences" of the subject of politics. This alternative reading proposes that underneath the famous model presented in *Disagreement*, which is premised on a formal theory of the subject and the principle of the equality of intelligence, there lies a thick layer of subjective experiences. This is a reading of Rancière's work, which has not received substantial attention among critics. I focus on all the passages in Rancière's writings that point toward a theory of political action, which emphasizes embodied experiences, feelings, and dreams as the beginning of politics.

## Statement of Originality

I hereby affirm that this thesis entitled, “The Political Subject and Its Experiences: An Alternative Reading of Rancière on Political Subjectivity” is a product of my own work. All the assistance received in preparing this thesis have been duly acknowledged.

I have clearly referenced in both the text and the bibliography or references, all sources (either from a printed source, internet or any other source) used in the work. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.



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# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Statement of Originality.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>POLITICS AND POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY IN <i>DIS-AGREEMENT</i> .....</b>	<b>12</b>
RANCIÈRE AND POLITICS.....	12
<i>The Beginning of Politics in Plato and Aristotle</i> .....	18
<i>Democracy as the Institution of Politics: Politics as a Miscount</i> .....	23
<i>Politics, Political Subjectivity, and Disagreement</i> .....	30
<i>Disagreement</i> .....	35
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	38
<b>CHAPTER 2 .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>THE SEEDS OF POLITICS AS POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY IN THE YOUNG RANCIÈRE.....</b>	<b>42</b>
EARLY INTELLECTUAL LIFE .....	44
<i>Meeting Althusser</i> .....	45
<i>Althusser's Project</i> .....	46
THE "SUBJECT" IN <i>READING CAPITAL</i> ACCORDING TO THE YOUNG RANCIÈRE .....	55
THE BREAK WITH ALTHUSSER .....	62
CHALLENGING ALTHUSSERIAN MARXISM.....	67
<i>"On the Theory of Ideology"</i> .....	67
<i>"How to use Lire le Capital"</i> .....	73
<i>Althusser's Lesson</i> .....	80
EARLY RANCIÈRE ON POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY .....	81
<b>CHAPTER 3 .....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>RANCIÈRE'S COMPLEX RELATION TO MARX .....</b>	<b>90</b>
FROM MARX AND BEYOND MARX.....	91
<i>Logical Revolts</i> .....	95
<i>The Philosopher and his Poor</i> .....	105
<i>Disagreement</i> .....	111
<b>CHAPTER 4 .....</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>THE PROLETARIAN LIFE.....</b>	<b>117</b>
PROLETARIAN NIGHTS: WORKERS' DREAM IN 19TH CENTURY FRANCE.....	119
<i>Proletarian Experience</i> .....	126
<i>The Proletarian Demand</i> .....	126
Negative Proletarian Experience.....	129
Positive Proletarian Experience .....	138
Clouds of Reverie .....	139
Association, Solidarity, and Workers' Movements.....	144
The Promises of Association (Equality, Education, Retirement, Family, and Fraternal Love) .....	147
Egotism and Workers' Ambiguous Relationship to Work .....	154
AFFECTS, IMAGINATION AND THE BODY: POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY IN RANCIÈRE 'S PROLETARIAN NIGHTS .....	158
CONCLUSION .....	167
<b>CHAPTER 5 .....</b>	<b>172</b>
<b>POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY IN <i>THE IGNORANT SCHOOLMASTER</i>.....</b>	<b>172</b>
THE DEBATE ON EDUCATION IN FRANCE IN THE 1980'S .....	174
BOURDIEU'S SOCIOLOGY .....	176
RANCIÈRE'S CRITIQUE OF BOURDIEU .....	181
RECONSTRUCTION OF THE IGNORANT SCHOOLMASTER .....	188

<i>Joseph Jacotot</i> .....	190
<i>Jacotot's Critique of Explication</i> .....	191
<i>Jacotot's Universal Method of Teaching</i> .....	193
<i>One can teach what one doesn't know</i> .....	194
<i>Everyone is equal (Equality of Intelligence)</i> .....	196
Speech and Language.....	196
<i>Everything is in everything</i> .....	199
PEDAGOGY AND POLITICS .....	201
<i>Translation</i> .....	203
<i>Will</i> .....	210
<i>Equality and Political Subjectivation</i> .....	213
<b>CHAPTER 6 .....</b>	<b>218</b>
<b>THE SUBJECT OF AESTHETICS AND POLITICS .....</b>	<b>218</b>
THE LINK BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND POLITICS .....	218
<i>The Politics of Aesthetics</i> .....	221
<i>The Regimes of the Art</i> .....	224
Ethical Regime .....	224
Representative Regime.....	225
The Aesthetic Regime .....	227
THE POLITICAL SUBJECT IN THE AESTHETIC REGIME OF ARTS .....	232
THE AESTHETIC SUBJECT: LOGOS IN PATHOS, PATHOS IN LOGOS .....	233
<i>Speaking Bodies</i> .....	237
<i>Passive bodies and the plebeian dream</i> .....	243
<i>Objects as Bodies</i> .....	245
CONCLUSION .....	247
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>250</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>269</b>





## **Introduction**

### **Who is the Subject of Politics?**

I began this thesis with a single guiding question, “Who is the subject of politics?” The inquiry, naïve as it may sound, springs from a legitimate concern to understand what comprises political subjectivity and who exactly we are referring to when we speak about political subjects. It is an inquiry that is interested with the individuals who engage in political activity. What comprises the subject who participate in politics? And what does it mean for someone to start questioning and challenging the social order? One way to understand these questions in particular is to focus on the link between what counts as typical political questions and the reality of social life. This inquiry may thus extend to a broader scope that encompasses social ontology and social inclusion, involving questions such as, who should be counted as parts of society. What is the basis of the count? What forms of oppression are committed by particular ways of counting the ‘parts’ of the society? And how should political subjects act given that they comprise the very fabric of political and social life?

The query is an old question dating back to ancient Greek philosophy where there has always been sustained interest in political philosophy, about the image of the subject that needs to accompany the theory of political norms and political institutions. Since the Greeks, the question has remained for as long as there is politics, the embeddedness of subjectivity in the establishment of the polis and the conduct of governing and being governed in the community persistently follows. Indeed, the topic of political agency is still an important question in contemporary political philosophy. Many contemporary philosophers have addressed issues of politics from the angle of who the subject of politics is. For instance, such interest on the political subject is an important part of mainstream political liberalism. John Rawls who is a pioneer thinker of egalitarian liberalism, premises his theory of justice on two cardinal virtues of the agents who take part in democratic deliberation, i.e. reasonableness and rationality. For Rawls an ideal society is a

society where its members who are free and rational individuals reach a consensus to live and enjoy equal rights. Aside from Rawls, in continental political philosophy, Alain Badiou maintains this tradition of politics defined specifically in terms of a subjective quality through his notion of fidelity to an event of truth. The interest on the topic of political agency in the works of Rawls and Badiou who are both important thinkers in contemporary politics prove that the question of political subjectivity remains to be an important question at present. These authors as well as many other major thinkers in politics have thick notions of subjectivity, which they relate to politics.<sup>1</sup>

In order to further explore this issue of political subjectivity, I am focusing on the works of one particular philosopher, the French philosopher, Jacques Rancière. The reason for this specific focus is because Rancière's famous theory of politics centers precisely on the notion of subjectivity, with his fundamental claim that politics itself should be defined as a process of subjectivation, that is, the very process of creating political subjects. For him, politics in its genuine sense, as opposed to the mere economic and legal management of society, happens when someone from the demos rises up to demand recognition and in the process constitute itself as a political subject. While other major thinkers in contemporary political philosophy also emphasize subjectivity in order to better define politics, as said, Rancière's method is unique. His mature theory of politics comes from the background of a long study of emancipatory political movements, more specifically the early labor movement in France. Rancière thus allocates a considerable amount of attention to real political subjects, especially those subjects who did so much to extend the meaning and scope of democratic politics in the last 200 years. His treatment of these subjects sets him apart from other thinkers who have the tendency to approach the question of political subjectivity from a position of intellectual privilege and thus risk discrediting the validity of the experience of real political subjects. This substantial historical background and the very particular use Rancière makes of it, mean that his theory of subjectivation, on the one hand

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<sup>1</sup> Aside from Rawls and Badiou, other thinkers who have references to a notion of the political subject are Louis Althusser (1971), Michel Foucault (1970), Fredric Jameson (1981) and Slavoj Žižek (1999).

rejects any thick idea of subjectivity as ground of politics, as in other comparable theories, and yet, on the other hand, his method makes it possible to refer the theoretical work to the actual experiences and voices of political subjects.

Indeed, Rancière is particularly useful for the question of political subjectivity not just for the positive reasons I have just delineated, but also because of the very tension that is built into his work. On the one hand, his theory of subjectivation exhibits a trace of the structuralist background, which has influenced him immensely in his younger years when he started as an Althusserian Marxist. As a matter of fact, the political subject for him is empty, which means that it is devoid of any ontological identification that establishes her or him as a fixed entity. The political subject is in a continuous process of disidentification as it asserts equality within political contestations. However, despite the claim that the subject is empty, Rancière always referred to the experiences of real political subjects, not just in his archival work but also throughout his work, including later on when he conducted an ontological kind of political theory, similar to the one of Alain Badiou. These references to real subjects make their way into the heart of the theory of the political subjects. As a result, in all his writings, there are numerous allusions to the thickness of the experiences of political subjects. He discusses them as having bodies that feel and suffer, minds that dream and express themselves in material forms of discourse. This is in stark contrast to the claim that the political subject is empty and lacks any substantial referents. My wager has been that investigating this ambiguity in the notion of political subjectivity by tracing its development throughout Rancière's work, can give us valuable insights about the question of who is the subject of politics.

This elaborate theory of politics as political subjectivation has made Rancière an influential thinker in contemporary political philosophy especially for other thinkers who want to find an alternative view of politics beyond its definition as consensus building and as the administering of resources within society. As a matter of fact, there have been a significant number of publications

about Rancière's works, which include interpretations<sup>2</sup>, critiques<sup>3</sup> and even application of his ideas<sup>4</sup> to contemporary political issues. Many of these uses of Rancière emphasize the radical democratic theory of disagreement, which first made Rancière famous in the English-speaking academe, when *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* appeared in an English translation in 1995. It was this translation of *Disagreement* that propelled Rancière into the limelight whereas many of his writings up until then had remained limited to French readers.<sup>5</sup> It was also because of the attention on this text that an "official" orthodox reading of Rancière's work developed. This reading focused around the clarification of his idea of 'politics' and its discursive, evental character rather than on the experiences of the political subjects, which he had described substantially, notably in his earlier works. And although it made Rancière influential among English speaking thinkers, the focus on *Disagreement* generated a partial interpretation of his oeuvre that is concentrated on the discursive aspect of politics and political subjectivation.

Due to the emphasis on politics as being mainly about the discursive contestation of inequality through the performative speech of the empty political subject, Rancière's theory of

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars who have sustained an interest in Rancière's work on politics and who have dedicated a substantial amount of time, effort and attention to interpret and comment on his writings include: Samuel Chambers (2005, 2011, 2012, 2018), Oliver Davis (2010, 2013) Jean-Philippe Deranty (2003a, 2003b., 2007, 2010, 2012, 2018), Davide Panagia (2006, 2009, 2018), Todd May (2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2010). The publications of these authors are dedicated to either an interpretation of Rancière, an appropriation of his idea to contemporary political events, or to linking Rancière in dialogue with other contemporary authors of political theory. Aside from those whom I have listed here, there is also a number of Rancière's readers whose interest in his work stems from specific questions. For instance, notable scholars who are interested in pedagogy and education include, Gert Biesta (2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012), Caroline Pelletier (2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2012). For a more comprehensive list of authors who have engaged in the work of Rancière, please see the Bibliography of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Most critiques of Rancière, share the belief that he does not offer a plausible solution to the problems and impasses that he has identified in politics. They claim that Rancière's rejection of organizational and institutional politics renders it passive and un-universalizable. The list of critiques of Rancière's works includes Alain Badiou (2004, 2005), Yves Citton (2009), Jodi Dean (2009), Michael Dillon (2003), Michaela Fiserova, (2018) Peter Hallward (2009), Gilles Labelle (2011), Paulina Tambakaki (2009), Karen Zivi (2016) and Slavoj Žižek (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Some authors choose to draw from what they perceive as Rancière's idiosyncratic ideas and use these for their particular problems. See notably Isabell Lorey (2011) Adriel Trot (2012), Matthias Lievens (2014) Nicolas Pirsoul (2017) Katharina Clausius (2017) – Many of these thinkers extend Rancière's work to the analysis of contemporary political movements such as the Occupy Movement, Arab Spring and the plight of minorities such as indigenous people. There are also readings of Rancière by artists, educators lawyers and practitioners and theorists from other fields.

<sup>5</sup> Prior to the translation of *Disagreement*, Rancière was already well known among labor theorists and post Althusserians because of his work on *The Nights of Labor* later re-published as *Proletarian Nights*.

politics has been generally characterized as a periodic break or a decisive rupture from the normative hierarchical structure that has been set to organize society. Despite the important role that political subjects contribute to this performative politics, the material aspects of subjectivity, such as the body of the subject along with its affects, dreams, experiences and suffering, are often overlooked. However, they are arguably equally important, if only we take the trouble of reading Rancière for what he has actually constantly been writing about.

As I have pointed out, the predominance of what could be described as a one-sided orthodox interpretation of Rancière's work brought about a number of conflicted interpretations that occasionally end up critiquing Rancière's work. Claire Woodford succinctly pointed out these critiques in "'Reinventing Modes of Dreaming' and Doing: Jacques Rancière and Strategies for a New Left." Woodford has undertaken a detailed description of the major criticisms of Rancière's work particularly its alleged failure to conjure up concrete and universalizable solutions to the problems he has identified in contemporary politics.<sup>6</sup> Against these criticisms, she argued that, "politics understood as a rupture provides us with a vibrant, ever-adaptable strategy of resistance and renewal that could be used to inspire and revitalize a new left."<sup>7</sup> A significant argument of Woodford relies on an analysis of Rancière's early text, *Proletarian Nights*, in particular Gauny's spatio-temporal subversion of time by dreaming in the workshop. This move on the part of Woodford confirms the intuition that there is a rich material about political subjectivation that could be drawn out from Rancière's work and which can be used for contemporary politics.

Amidst the predominantly discursive interpretations, there are some readings of Rancière that on the other hand, focused on this unexplored dimension of the political subject in his work. For instance, Deranty has consistently argued about the bodily and the material aspect of

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<sup>6</sup> Claire Woodford, "'Reinventing modes of dreaming' and doing: Jacques Rancière and strategies for a new left," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 41, no. 8 (2015): 811-836, doi: 10.1177/0191453714563878. Woodford's text takes particular issue on criticisms of Rancière from the Left who claim that the work of Rancière does not provide a concrete solution to the problems of politics that he identified.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 811.

subjectivity, which can be found in Rancière's writings.<sup>8</sup> Also, taking her cue from Deranty, Laura Quintana, in a particularly insightful study, "Jacques Rancière and the Emancipation of Bodies," identified the instances in some of Rancière's work particularly *Proletarian Nights*, wherein the latter referred to the role of corporeality in his notion of emancipation. In laying down her argument, she has constructed a taxonomy of what she called the "problematic readings of Rancière," which have developed when his early writings were overlooked. These three categories were: 1. voluntarist readings of Rancière that interpreted intellectual emancipation as liberation of the subjective will; 2. dichotomous readings of emancipation that construe it as an utterly excessive moment which is entirely outside of police logic;<sup>9</sup> and 3. approaches that consider Rancière's emancipation to be tenuous since it cannot bring any significant difference to the world.<sup>10</sup> These readings, which are predominantly fixated on the discursive aspects of Rancière's politics tend to have an ambiguous approach towards different dimensions of subjectivity that are present in Rancière's texts, for instance, the affective and the bodily which are in fact important aspects of political subjectivity. Deranty, Woodford and Quintana's readings of Rancière significantly point to the non-discursive aspects of political subjectivation in Rancière's works on politics and aesthetics, which put emphasis on its creative and bodily aspect.

Against many of the official readings of Rancière's politics, a rich, admittedly often implicit account of politics and political subjectivity can be found throughout his writings as I just pointed out. Only a few interpreters including the ones that I have just mentioned have drawn upon this reading and Rancière himself often tends to underemphasize it. This is an understanding of politics that refers to the embodied dimensions of subjectivity, to the phenomenological, the flesh and blood aspect of the subject and one that is not predominantly defined through, or at least not

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<sup>8</sup> Deranty (2013, 2016, 2017, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Typical of such readings of Rancière are influential as well as recent accounts, such as: May, (2008, 2009a, 2010a), Myers (2016), Žižek (2006).

<sup>10</sup> Laura Quintana, "Jacques Rancière and the Emancipation of Bodies," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (June 2018) : 2, doi:10.1177/0191453718780529.

reduced to, discursive activity. Therefore, in order to answer my first question, I establish an alternative reading of Rancière, which will focus on this lesser emphasized aspect of his theory of politics and political subjectivation.

In order to undertake this alternative reading of Rancière, I follow a close chronological order, from the chapters in *Reading Capital* to *Aisthesis*. Within these works, I focus on and mobilize the many passages in which Rancière fleshed out the discursive account of politics with the ones based on the references to experience. Thus, this thesis is composed of six chapters that follow the development of Rancière's thought from the beginning of his career as a student of Althusser in the 1960s, to his recent work on aesthetics as politics and politics as aesthetics. Each chapter begins by situating Rancière's writings within the historical contexts and the intellectual debates that shaped his thoughts about politics. Many times, I had to write about Rancière in a semi-biographical manner where I identified specific thinkers, existing debates and events that influenced his conception of politics and political subjectivity at specific junctures. This is crucial to do as Rancière always develops his argument in direct reference to the specific context of his interventions. Each chapter then aims to present the new elements he added to his notion of the political subject. By patiently reconstructing his work through a chronological reading of his texts, I aim to gather rich and interesting material to answer my fundamental question: "who is the subject of politics?"

In Chapter 1, I discuss Rancière's most famous and influential text, *Disagreement*, in order to establish his orthodox, mainstream position that the rest of the thesis seeks to problematize and enrich. In this section, I present Rancière's politics as predominantly about discourse and the political subject as an empty subject. This is important because in the subsequent chapters, I attempt to show that this account of subjectivity is, in fact, richer than how it first appears in this famous text that has attracted the most critical attention. While most interpreters of Rancière's work tend to capitalize on the idea of politics as discursive contestation and on the idea of the political subject as empty, I argue in the subsequent chapters that Rancière has a much richer

theory of political subjectivity that involves affects, bodies, will, experiences and the aspirations of the subject.

The second chapter is where I begin to trace the development of Rancière's thoughts about politics and political subjectivation during the 1960s. This chapter shows how the seed of his mature position, when he started to build his own notion of politics, was a reaction against Althusserian Marxism and against his own position as a participant in the famous seminar published as *Reading Capital*. Rancière's later theory of subjectivity is deeply influenced by his criticisms of Althusserian Marxist science. The break away from Althusser defined the path that Rancière will be working on in his entire career, namely the attempt to give the people their voices back, and to allow them to speak as they are. The key text for this chapter includes *Reading Capital*, *Althusser's Lessons*, and the essays "On the Theory of Ideology" and "How to Use *Lire le Capital*."

As a continuation of Rancière's criticism of intellectual elitism, which began in his critique of Althusser and his own early position in *Reading Capital*, Chapter 3 outlines Rancière's unique reading of Marx. Rancière's complex relationship with Marx, which later on evolved into a critique of the latter, was pivotal in his intellectual development as the texts that were written during this period following 1968 were those in which Rancière began to research the words and actions of 19th century workers. When Rancière founded the journal *Logical Revolts*, he was still a revolutionary Marxist who argued that what sets Marx apart from other thinkers is how his theory is informed by the experiences of the workers whom he encountered. Rancière himself followed this revolutionary Marxism only to realize later on that Marx himself was guilty of intellectual elitism in the sense that he did not truly believe that it is the proletarian class, which would abolish all classes. This is because the working class is trapped in labor to sustain their needs. This chapter shows the complexity that is involved in attempting to avoid the pitfalls of intellectual elitism from the very position of the project of proletarian emancipation. It ends up arguing for the emptiness of the political subject. The key texts for this chapter include key articles from *Logical Revolts*.



The fourth and the main chapter is dedicated to *Proletarian Nights*, which represents the culmination of Rancière's ten-year archival work. In this 400-page book, we find Rancière explicitly referring to the "other" dimension of subjectivity, namely, the experiences, affects and aspirations of workers who were part of the revolutions that overturned the monarchy in 19th century France. In this chapter, I demonstrate how in many instances, some seemingly insignificant moments and minute gestures of individual proletarian bodies can be the beginning of politics.

Chapter 5 is a discussion of one of Rancière's most famous works, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. What Rancière termed the "method of equality" was already present but still implicit in *Proletarian Nights*. In this chapter, I study Rancière's encounter with the revolutionary pedagogue Joseph Jacotot, who emphasized the importance of translation and will in the struggle for emancipation. I first outline the context of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* within the debate on education in 1980s France. This is a necessary move, as many readers of Rancière tend to focus mainly on pedagogy as a mere theoretical question and forget the political content of this work on Jacotot. This discussion entails a substantial account of Rancière's critique of Bourdieu. Rancière criticized Bourdieuan sociology, the main sociological paradigm in France in this time, as a method whose key postulates and conclusions entrench the divisions in society that they aim to study and often, to criticize. This chapter emphasizes Rancière's particular conception of translation as the proof of the political subject's equality of intelligence.

The thesis concludes with a chapter on the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Rancière directly links aesthetics to politics with the thought that the possibility for political action in aesthetics is that the latter can achieve a reconfiguration of the conditions of perception that underpin symbolic social divisions. Meaning is disrupted by those elements, groups or individuals that demand not only to exist but also to be perceived. The "distribution of the sensible" points to the political underpinnings of social perception. Thus for Rancière, there is aesthetics at the core of politics. In this chapter, I focus on the political subject's situation as a subject caught up in the pathos and logos of aesthetic modernity. This situation of being trapped in what Rancière calls

the “aesthetic regime of the arts” also presents many opportunities for the political subject to find creative means to emancipate themselves and become full subjects. Engaging with his paradigmatic examples such as Gauny, some stage artists, photographers, theater actors and others who engage in various artforms, Rancière describes the many uses of the subject’s body that mimic the effect of a revolution, such as arresting the mechanical logic of institutional space and time in order to escape experience of injustice or exploitation.

This thesis, which is a lengthy and careful reconstruction of Rancière’s key writings, thus takes us through some of the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions in Rancière’s work in order to outline a number of significant dimensions of political subjectivity in the conditions of modernity. Politics involves modes of contestation that usually need a discursive moment of articulation, but underneath this discursive layer, there is an underpinning layer that entails different dimensions of experience. In Rancière’s narrative about proletarians and the subject in the aesthetic regime of the arts, we witness how politics can also begin in the most minute, pre-discursive, embodied modes of being a subject. A subject is an embodied subject, a physical subject made of flesh, bones and blood, who engages in politics by mobilizing bodily experiences and affects. Thus we find the use of bodies for political contestations in both its active and passive form. An embodied subject is a subject who feels and in fact these feelings can be the beginning of politics. Underneath the discourse of proletarians are the numerous emotions that motivated them to engage in many forms of political action, such as writing, dreaming and forming barricades. What we learn from the real subjects that Rancière sought to bring back to light is that political activity can be based on the body’s experiences of suffering and even such emotions as romantic love, solidarity and longing. Subjects are also capable of dreaming, which means that they possess a cognitive capacity to imagine, hope and visualize an alternative to their life, inundated with the despair brought about by their economic condition. Political subjects can translate the words of others and use the words of others to formulate their own thoughts and their experiences into words. This means that they can in principle, have knowledge of anything. This

goes against the common belief that knowledge is a privilege of the few. All these unexplored dimensions of subjectivity are present in Rancière's work despite what he himself says about the political subject as being empty. They provide us with a rich material for reflection about the political subject. Indeed, as I show through a few examples in the conclusion, the realism of this theory has been attested in recent political history. This is what makes Rancière's theory of politics as subjectivation so compelling and enlightening.

## Chapter 1

### Politics and Political Subjectivity in *Dis-agreement*

This introductory chapter presents Rancière's basic notion of politics and political subjectivity from his 1990's works *Disagreement* and *On the Shores of Politics*. The first section discusses Rancière's project of rethinking democracy and politics by going back to the political philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. The second part, on the other hand, deals with Rancière's political subjectivity, which for him is a direct component of politics. Through the discussion of politics and political subjectivity in these two most important works of Rancière on politics, I will be able to explicate the key concepts of his philosophy pertinent to my research question, "Who is the Subject of Politics"? This chapter presents Rancière's "orthodox" account of politics as predominantly about discourse and the political subject as an empty subject. I will attempt to explain in the subsequent chapters that his account of subjectivity is, in fact, richer than what at first appears in these famous texts that have attracted the most critical attention.

#### **Rancière and Politics**

Rancière is one of the most influential thinkers belonging to the continental tradition of philosophy. Writing mainly on political questions during the early years of his career, his works are founded on the question of equality and emancipation. These are the two themes that bring his writings together from the earliest ones until his venture to aesthetics in the later part of his career. To describe the temperament of his inquiry, Rancière states: "My problem has always been to escape the divisions between disciplines, because what interests me is the question of the division of territories, which is always a way of deciding who is qualified to speak about what."<sup>11</sup> Rancière wrote massively against the elitist intellectual traditions of thinking similar to those, which were propounded by Plato, Aristotle, Althusser, Sartre, and Bourdieu among several others. He delved

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Rancière. "Critique de la Critique du "spectacle" (Interview by Jérôme Game)," *La Revue Internationale des livres et des idées* 12 (July 2009) in Oliver Davis, *Jacques Rancière, Key Contemporary Thinkers* (UK: Polity Press, 2010), 127.

into the archives of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century workers in France order to prove their equal capacity for thinking and challenge the elitist intellectual tradition of thinking about politics and its subjects.

As a thinker, Rancière is not interested in building a new philosophical system, but in looking at particular ways of thinking about existing theories, notably those related to political questions.<sup>12</sup> He is interested in various ways of how arguments are formulated and how we as political subjects are situated in relation to these arguments, and in our historical context as political agents, as well as other possible ways of looking into our manners of thinking. At the heart of this epistemological intervention is the belief that questioning theory has perceivable consequences in the realm of real politics. Rancière's political intervention aims to challenge the categories of political thinking, which he believed has direct consequences for the practice of politics.

Rancière's arguments are always formulated in the perspective of what is happening around him in the realm of the political. Wary and suspicious of the theoretical elitism that surrounded him in the early years of his student life, he came to an understanding that if there was any polemical intervention to be made, it could no longer be from the camp of the scientist or theorist, but from an engagement with political actors, namely those anonymous individuals who are, on the one hand, equal to everyone in the community but, on the other, are not even perceived or recognized as part of the collective whole.

Thus, Rancière was predominantly interested in questions of politics that directly affect the political subject. For instance, there are questions of participation and citizenship: Who is allowed to speak? Whose voices are given a chance to surface and be heard? Who is counted as a citizen? On what grounds should a subject be allowed to participate? In order to address these questions concretely in the context of democratic struggles in contemporary France, he spent ten years studying the archives of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French workers and endeavored to find the voices of these

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<sup>12</sup> In one of the interviews where Rancière was asked about his initial interests as a student, he replied with the following statement: "I didn't work on a philosophical theme, I wanted to work on a practice of thinking." Jacques Rancière. *The Method of Equality*, translated by Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016) 7.

people, who were rarely given attention. This archival work resulted in writings that disclosed how everyday people and anonymous figures such as a simple woman, a shoemaker, or a carpenter articulated their thoughts and contributed to the political contestations during their time. Such intervention at the theoretical level, tries to show for what theoretical reasons and in what kind of theoretical framework does it become possible for everyday people to speak. Rancière argued how these figures went against their label of being ‘mere workers’ by dedicating their time to performing activities, which are unexpected from them, e.g., writing poetry and periodicals, fighting for their right to suffrage, forming their own organizations.<sup>13</sup> As they did these, they clearly demonstrated that their intelligence is equal to everyone else.

In this regard, Rancière sets himself apart from other political thinkers who begin their theories in either a notion of political ontology or an ontological subject.<sup>14</sup> He does not focus his discussion on defining basic concepts such as the state, mechanisms of government, subjectivity, and the like. Rancière theorized on how to approach political questions, having in mind the stories of the people he encountered in his archival work with the belief that a theoretical intervention has a direct effect on the concrete realm of everyday people's politics.

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<sup>13</sup> In his writings, Rancière would always highlight how he came to the realization that that the anonymous workers and ordinary people are as equally intelligent as any man who claims to be a thinker. In fact, he said the workers “...had given philosophy the same conceptual heart as Plato namely that the worker is not primarily a social function but a certain relationship with the *logos*, and that he is assigned to certain temporal categories.” Jacques Rancière, “Interview: Jacques Rancière Democracy means equality – Passages” *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy*, 82 (Mar/Apr 1997), 29.

<sup>14</sup> The best example that comes to mind is Badiou whose own theory of politics and political subjectivity is very close to Rancière's. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans by. Oliver Feltham (London and New York: Continuum, 2005) Other contemporary philosophers who ground their notion of politics in ontology include Arendt, Agamben and Laclau.

For an insightful discussion on Rancière's ambiguous attitude towards political ontology, see Bram Ieven “Heteroreductives -Rancière's Disagreement with Ontology.” *Parallax*, 15 no. 3, (2009): 50-62 doi:10.1080/13534640902982728.

For Rancière's own elaboration of his position against ontology, refer to the essay where he talks about himself in the third person and wrote: “Most of those who conceptualize politics today do it on the basis of a general idea of the subject, if not on the basis of a general ontology. But Rancière argues that he cannot make any deduction from a theory of being as being to the understanding of politics, art or literature. The reason, he says, is that he knows nothing about what being as being may be. That's why he had to manage with his own resources which are not that much. Since he cannot deduce politics from any ontological principle, he chose to investigate it out of its limits, he means out of the situations in which its birth or its disappearance are staged.” Jacques Rancière “A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière,” *Parallax* 15, no 3: 114-23, 117, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534640902982983>

Rancière belongs to an intellectual lineage of French political thinkers with a strong Marxist background; for whom, however, the Marxist influence exerts itself not through economic analyses or sociological inquiries but through the role devoted to philosophy. Having been influenced by this tradition of doing philosophy, in one of his interviews, he claims to be engrossed in the practice of thinking instead of specific philosophical themes. This is the reason why his manner of doing philosophy is usually a reexamination, an interrogation, and a restaging of theories and methods of thinking, which have become ideologies that dominate people's lives. A distinctive mark of Rancière's work is his invitation to his readers to find imaginative ways of thinking about the things that we think we already “know.”<sup>15</sup> Such an approach led to the breakaway from Althusser and a questioning of Althusserian Marxism at the outset of student and workers' revolt in May 1968 in France. Rancière's question then was on how theories of emancipation such as those of Marx and Althusser become so distanced from the very people that they promise to liberate. This theoretical issue (the issues in other theories) has direct political import because of the strong interface between theoretical practice and real politics in general, and in France in particular, notably during the years when Rancière developed his thinking.

The same motivations that spring from the problem of theory versus practice prompted Rancière to question the events that followed the 1990's fall of Soviet Marxism and the so-called triumph of liberal democracy. In *On the Shores of Politics*, Rancière describes the contemporary political scene in the following words: “Suddenly politics was no longer the art of advancing the energies of the world but rather that of preventing civil war through a rational deployment of the One, of the call to unity. Apparently, multiplicity could not, after all, attain peace of its own accord.”<sup>16</sup> This strange relationship between the assertion of the global triumph of consensual and peaceful democracy, and those new forms of violence that accompanied it elicited Rancière to ask

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<sup>15</sup> Donald Reid, “Introduction to Proletarian Nights,” Jacques Rancière *Proletarian Nights*, translated by John Drury (London, New York: Verso, 2012) xxxv. Rancière applies this attitude towards Democracy, Politics, Aesthetics, Translation and Pedagogy.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, translated by Liz Heron, (London and New York: Verso: 1995), 8.

the question about the correspondence of democracy in name and in practice. These descriptions are first and foremost premised on the opposition between the two meanings of democracy in Rancière's works, which I will discuss in the succeeding parts of this chapter.

*Disagreement*, his major work on political theory, centers on an observable problem in the politics of our time: the lack of correspondence between the name democracy and its practice. Rancière was alarmed at the emergence of events that followed from the adoption of a certain theory of politics. He took the resurgence of xenophobia, religious pluralism, consumerism, state wars, and theories about the end of politics as symptomatic of a problem that springs from a definition of democratic politics. It seems that the definition of politics as consensus democracy, viewed as the solution to the political problems that besiege our time, was, in truth, the malaise that needed to be addressed.

Rancière thought that there was a need to rethink, reexamine, and reimagine politics in an effort to view what may have been taken for granted since the time of the political philosophers who first attempted to explain what politics is. To address the issue of the lack of correspondence between the name democracy and its practice, Rancière referred to the works of the classical philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, who according to him are "the most modern theorists of the political."<sup>17</sup> As he examined the works of the said Greek philosophers, Rancière keenly observed that the same logic of consensus, which underpins the illusionary concept of democracy or the wrong concept of democracy that rewinds all the way back to the works of Plato and Aristotle, is still in effect until our time.<sup>18</sup> As early as the time of Plato and Aristotle, there has always been a

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<sup>17</sup> Plato and Aristotle are modern political thinkers in the sense that they are the basic political theorists and their ideas are still in effect until today. Jacques Rancière, "Interview. *Democracy means Equality*," 30.

<sup>18</sup> The exact quotation states, "What the classics teach us first and foremost is that politics is not a matter of ties between individuals and the community. Politics arises from a count of community 'parts,' which is always a false count, a double count or a miscount." Rancière. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* translated by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 1999, 6.



misfit in thought that has consistently accompanied the move away from politics in the reality of societies.

The return to the ancient philosophers is instilled with double agenda. On the one hand, it serves as material for reflection on democracy, particularly on its specificity; on democracy as a form of action; and on what it consists of. In his own words, Rancière asserts that his reexamination of democracy via Plato and Aristotle aims, “...to deduce a few landmarks for reflection that will clarify what might be understood by the term democracy and the way it differs from the practices and legitimizations of the consensus system...”<sup>19</sup> However, although it is an entry point of reflection, this reexamination of ancient Greek political thought also critiques how Plato and Aristotle instituted a definition of politics based on a description of the human being as an animal possessing speech, therefore introducing a hierarchical division of beings in the *polis*. Moreover, it also criticizes the theoretical elitism of philosophy as it always ends up entrenching social divisions in the name of seemingly abstract ontological terms.<sup>20</sup>

The venture on the question of politics highlighted in *Disagreement* as well as in *On the Shores of Politics* moves around this question of “what politics can mean” having in mind the contradictions of the events of the 1990's, namely the triumph of democracy coupled with the return of the same problems that have always besieged its practice—mass individualism, racism, consumerism, and religious conflicts among others. Rancière restages the relationship between the ancient Greek philosophers’ account of democracy and the emergence of modern consensus democracy for the reopening of a democratic debate, which has evolved into a political regime that has failed to meet its promise of equality.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, he explores how political philosophy

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>20</sup> As we will see in Chapter 3 of this thesis, Rancière dedicated a whole book, i.e., *The Philosopher and his Poor* to show this constant implicit elitist background or seemingly purely analytical theoretical analysis in political philosophy.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Rancière translated by Steven Corcoran “Introducing disagreement,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 9, no. 3(2004): 4. DOI: 10.1080/0969725042000307583.

has managed the ‘political’ and shaped it into a form of social order to organize society. The next section highlights how Plato and Aristotle have accomplished this task of founding the root of politics on man’s capacity to speak and how real politics continuously escapes such a hierarchical ordering because of its essentially democratic dimension.

### **The Beginning of Politics in Plato and Aristotle**

Rancière’s discussion on the problem of politics revolves around the question of the lack of correspondence between the name democracy and its practice. To address this problem, he draws a conceptual comparison between the politics in our time and the problem of politics discussed by Aristotle and Plato.<sup>22</sup> The first question Rancière undertook to address, in his return to the Greek philosophers, was the question of the origins of politics. The traditional political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle establishes politics on something like an anthropological invariant namely, language as a means of rational communication between individuals possessing intelligence.<sup>23</sup> Politics is founded on the capacity of the human being to participate in the affairs of the State by possessing intelligence that allows him to distinguish between good and evil, useful and harmful; the differentiation of which manifests in speech. Rancière quotes Aristotle’s *Politics* in which the philosopher elevates language to the level of an aptitude for judgment that distinguishes humans from animals. The capacity for speech is an expression of intelligence in contrast to animals whose noises are mere expressions of pleasure or pain. In Aristotle, Rancière

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<sup>22</sup> Rancière’s major writing on politics, *Disagreement*, written in the 1990’s, was provoked by the so-called triumph of democracy over totalitarian regimes which was marked by the fall of the Soviet socialism. These triumphs were followed by either a purely philosophical or political investigation of the politics which Rancière viewed as dangerous because they served only to legitimize liberal democracies. Moreover, these investigations cannot go beyond a definition of democracy focused on the primacy of the welfare and authority of the state hence the common understanding of politics as police. As a consequence, these returns took for granted the historical, political subject that could emerge anytime.

<sup>23</sup> Intelligence is a key Rancièrian concept that focuses on the capacity of particular individuals to produce reasons and to hear and understand reasons.

finds the contrast between speech/*logos* as a manifestation of intelligence and voice/*phônê* as a mere animal sound.<sup>24</sup>

Aristotle builds the foundation of the community on the social field, for it involves the relationship between beings of speech who participate in matters of the state by sharing their views. Moreover, speech serves as a rational tool for organization that structures the community while it operates and decides the distribution of resources, the maintenance of peace and order, the norms, and the moral standards of actions through participation in a rational discourse that involves exchanging of views. As a consequence of this social foundation of politics, there is the institution of division in the community between those who speak in the proper sense of the term and those who merely create noise when they “speak.” For Aristotle, the capacity to speak therefore legitimizes a human being as a citizen of the state by virtue of his entitlement to express his thoughts in speech. It confers the title ‘citizen’ to an individual and thus allows inclusion in the ‘count’ of who participate in the actuality of governing and being governed.<sup>25</sup>

The same institution of the political on the social can be found in the work of Plato who ended up psychologizing and sociologizing the elements of the political apparatus.<sup>26</sup> Plato organized the *Republic* by introducing four kinds of people; each has a particular task to fulfill, which ensures the harmony of the republic. The division of tasks, however, depends on their capacities: those who are intelligent are the ruling class; those who have bodily strength are the

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<sup>24</sup> The exact quote states: “Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and she has endowed man alone among the animals with the power of speech. Speech is something different from voice, which is possessed by other animals also and used by them to express pain or pleasure but to communicate these feelings to each other. Speech, on the other hand, serves to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust. For the real difference between man and other animals is that humans alone have perceptions of good and evil, the just and the unjust, etc. It is the sharing of a common view in these matters that makes a household and a state.” Aristotle Politics I, 1253a 9-17, Aristotle Politics, III, 1282 b 21 translated by T.A. Sinclair, revised by Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), 60.

<sup>25</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *Introducing Disagreement*, 4. And, *On the Shores of Politics*, Chapter 1.

<sup>26</sup> Plato’s political project involved organizing the polis through the construction of city parts that correspond to the appetites of the soul. This kind of organization appeals to a sense of harmony and order akin to mathematical proportion. In *Disagreement*, Rancière describes this project of Plato through the following words, “In the city and in the soul and in the soul, as in the science of surfaces, volumes, and stars, philosophy strives to replace arithmetical equality with geometric equality.” See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 15, 69.

guardians of city; those who are good at affairs of exchanging goods and calculating become the merchant class; and lastly, those who do not have any talents become the laborers. Plato's account is one of the earliest attempts toward a social division of the *polis*.

According to Rancière's peculiar, idiosyncratic account of politics, neither Plato nor Aristotle managed to provide an account of the origin of politics; they rather divided the community into two groups, i.e., those whose speech is recognized and those who are merely creating noise. Rancière disagrees with both Greek philosophers and argues that the opposition between speech and noise, which they have instituted, is not the real basis of politics but in fact, "one of the stakes of the disputes of politics."<sup>27</sup> Rancière maintains:

At the heart of politics lies a double wrong, a fundamental conflict, never conducted as such, over the relationship between the capacity for the speaking being who is without qualification and political capacity...Politics exists because the logos is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the account that is made of this speech: the account by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech, capable of enunciating what is just, whereas some other emission is merely perceived as a noise signaling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt.<sup>28</sup>

Aristotle and Plato were able to identify rational discourse as a core component of politics. However, Rancière observes that the politics of these Greek philosophers harbors social division and therefore introduces inequality, peculiar to the understanding of speech as a sign of intelligence from which follows an entitlement to inclusion in the community. There appears an inherently unequal division of individuals in the community based on whoever has the claim to speak up. The privilege to speak is brought about by social titles such as wealth, order of birth, gender, intellectual capacity, or physical strength.<sup>29</sup>

This kind of politics institutes inequality in terms of who possesses the right of speech, thus making it impossible for everybody's inclusion in the affairs of the state. Moreover, it also creates

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<sup>27</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 22-23.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Plato talks about the soul of gold infused in the body of the philosopher king and iron in the body of the worker as ground for the division of labor in society.

a divide between those who are deemed as citizens and the rest of the people. Deranty argues that, “philosophy’s turn to resources of rationality”—language, in the case of Aristotle—“presupposes that there are rational ways of accounting for the existence, structuring and functioning of political communities from which follows the denial of the polis as a product of its citizen’s activity.”<sup>30</sup>

Rancière argues that this whole system founded on a division of individuals based on an entitlement to speech is not real politics but a politics of consensus that works on maintaining order and harmony. For Rancière, “politics is never simply speech but also the account of what is made of this speech,”<sup>31</sup> whether this speech is dismissed or acknowledged, forgotten or counted. The politics that functions to provide structure in society is not politics in the genuine sense, but what he calls the *police*. The logic of the police is when “Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution.”<sup>32</sup> This is the very logic through which communities founded on hierarchical language operate. It is a logic that assigns order and “defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying where names and tasks correspond to each other; it is an order of the visible and the sayable, which sees to it that a particular activity is visible and another is not, and that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.”<sup>33</sup> For the sake of order, the logic of the police thrives in a politics of consensus, i.e., a politics of homogeneity where the stakes lie in the hands of the people who have agreed not to speak against an existing order.

Ensuring the preservation of the community through the maintenance of consensus among the citizens remains one of the goals of the police. Politics, in this sense of the police, therefore is focused on an effective management of economic affairs and the distribution of resources and

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<sup>30</sup> Jean-Philippe Deranty “Jacques Rancière’s Contribution to the Ethics of Recognition,” *Political Theory* 31, no. 1 (2003): 142 < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3595663> > (accessed July 2017)

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 22-23.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

symbolic statuses according to what is deemed fair, and on a definition of fairness that directly relates to the notion of entitlements (e.g., birth, wealth, intelligence, and so on). In the example from Plato's *Republic*, the *Republic* can only efficiently function if people are given what they deserve based on their worth, e.g., the more noble versus the less noble, the philosopher king versus the artisans. The same logic operates in Aristotle's *Politics* in which the basis of citizenship is excellence of virtue and wealth in such a way that the only ones allowed to participate are those who have the luxury of time because they have no immediate need to sustain their existence.<sup>34</sup> The police therefore functions on the basis of inclusion and exclusion of some over the majority. Society is kept intact by allowing a few who are either intelligent or affluent to decide on matters of the state.

In *Disagreement*, Rancière states that politics only happens the moment “when one stops balancing profits and losses and worries instead about distributing common lots and evening out communal shares and entitlements to these shares, the *axiai*”<sup>35</sup> entitling one to community”.<sup>36</sup> The concrete realization of what politics is about only takes place the moment one stops adhering to the logic of the *police*. Real politics cannot be deduced from speech that institutes a hierarchy of individuals on an alleged basis of intellectual or other capacities, which is grounded on social titles. It is only when everyone is included in the ‘count’ of participation, i.e., when one is acknowledged as a part of the whole, that politics, in principle, operates in practice. However, such a kind of universal inclusion is only possible around specific knots where some forms of exclusion take place. In fact, this seems to be the true sense of politics for Rancière—not so much universal participation but rather the struggle denouncing and struggling against the obstacles for universal

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<sup>34</sup> Rancière coined three neologisms for his discussion of the politics of the philosophers, Archipolitics for politics according to Plato, Parapolitics for Aristotle and Metapolitics for Marx. Bruno Bosteels has a useful discussion of Rancière's neologisms. See Bruno Bosteels “Archipolitics, Parapolitics, Metapolitics,” in *Jacques Rancière, Key Concepts*. ed. by Jean-Philippine Deranty. (UK: Acumen, 2010), 80-92.

<sup>35</sup> This is a Greek term meaning value or worth of merit that becomes a basis of entitlement.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 5.

participation. In *On the Shores of Politics*, Rancière calls “the art of politics” as “the art of putting the democratic contradiction to positive use.”<sup>37</sup> Real politics is the practice of democracy, that is the contestation of one’s exclusion and thus the moment when universal participation becomes an actual right and ceases to be in principle only.

What Plato and Aristotle introduced is not real politics; rather, it is what Rancière calls police. This kind of politics only functions to maintain order at the expense of the exclusion of others and therefore fails to take everyone into account. On the contrary, real politics, according to Rancière, is democracy that inherently comprises the recognition of everyone’s equality. Having mentioned this, the next section delineates the mechanisms of democracy to be able to shed light on Rancière’s interpretation of politics.

### **Democracy as the Institution of Politics: Politics as a Miscount**

Real politics is the practice of democracy, not democracy only in name. However, even in the democracy of Athens, the inherent contradiction between democracy in name and in practice is at work. The Athenians named their politics ‘democracy,’ which etymologically refers to a combination of two Greek terms *demos* that pertains to people and *kratein* that means power to rule. Put together, democracy means the rule of the people. In principle, the name democracy bears the very notion that sets it apart from other manners of governing the state, namely the *demos* who embody the inherent equality of participation accorded to everyone regardless of circumstance.

The politician Pericles enumerated the basic principles of democracy in his eulogy for the Athenians who died in the Peloponnesian war: personal liberty, inclusiveness, openness, and equality. The first line of the eulogy captures, in essence, the emphasis on the inclusion of everyone in the affairs of the state. Pericles accentuates, "Our constitution is called a democracy because

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<sup>37</sup> Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, 15.

power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people."<sup>38</sup> Politics therefore, in the context of Athenian democracy, is fundamentally understood as the rule of the *demos* who epitomize the equality of anyone with everyone.

Nevertheless, Athenian democracy, although appealing to the universal concept of the *demos*, was primarily ruled by people who were either born into privilege or of exceptional intelligence. The conduct of the affairs of the Athenian state thrived on the exclusion of those who were not entitled to speech. Such is the case that when someone from the *demos* speaks up, he or she is met with ambivalence. This introduces a paradox that on the one hand, democracy in name is grounded on the recognition of everyone's equality but in practice excludes the anonymous citizens of the polis.

According to Rancière, Plato and Aristotle captured, in theory, this paradox of Athenian democracy when they constructed their definition of politics based upon entitlement to speech which, in turn, insinuated a hierarchical division of individuals in society. This move demonstrates how the Greek philosophers assembled politics in the social field, a field that is not capable of containing politics and therefore ends up dividing it into parts.<sup>39</sup> By instituting the political on the social, Plato and Aristotle made way for the justification of social hierarchy that rationalizes the logic of domination.

The institution of a hierarchical division in the polis results in the emergence of an entity that is a product of a false count, a double count, or a miscount.<sup>40</sup> There is miscount because there are parts of the community that are excluded on the basis of a lack of entitlement or a wrong

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<sup>38</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* translated by Rex Warner with an introduction by Michael Finley (New York: Penguin Classics, 1954) 23.

<sup>39</sup> Plato and Aristotle provided a conceptual account of this contradiction when they articulated in their works, the fact that politics is neither about individuals nor the relationship between individuals and the community but about counting the community parts.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 6.



entitlement that does not exclusively belong to it.<sup>41</sup> Parts of the whole community are excluded as parts; thus, there are parts which have no part, entities that are both part and whole but are not counted, and elements of the community that are in the community yet not considered as its composition. The miscount results from the lack of fit between a totality that is both universal and exclusionary or what is more commonly known as the *demos*.

Politics arises when the excluded, the part of those who have no part, reveal this fundamental miscount. When a group of people or class (e.g., poor, proletarian, women) manifests its capacity to speak and demand for recognition, inclusion, and participation in the community, it shows the paradoxical ontological structure of politics as a “wrong” count of its parts. Politics therefore is a performative action of those who are excluded, uncounted—the universal concept of the *demos* which also happens to be particularly uncounted.

The *demos* is the universal concept that is the heart of democracy and on which the notion of an all-inclusive Athenian politics is anchored. Pertaining neither to the masses nor to a class, it is an abstract separation of a population from itself, the supplementary over and above, the sum of a population's part, unaccounted and unrecognized, and the part which has no part.<sup>42</sup> The *demos* is the component of politics that will always escape appropriation and is often out of proportion because of the incapacity of the social field to accommodate real equality, full participation, and universal inclusion. From this understanding of the *demos* as this community that is always split by division in such a way that these divisions are all challengeable, and an understanding of a challenge to that division, Rancière draws the conclusion that politics is simply synonymous with

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<sup>41</sup> In reference to Aristotle, there is a one to one correspondence of an entitlement to a particular class. For instance, wealth for the oligoi, virtue for the aristoi and freedom for the *demos*. Notice, however, that unlike wealth and virtue which exclusively belong to the rich and the wise, freedom is that which is entitled to everyone and not the *demos* alone. Freedom is a property, which is not proper to the *demos* only in as much as it shares this property with everyone in the society. This shows a miscount or the lack of proportion that prevents the institution of either an arithmetic or geometric justice.

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 30.

democracy whether *demos* is the strange ontological object that is the split community or the community that is always imbued with division.

Political philosophy may have succeeded in presenting an idea of politics based on a hierarchy, but real politics is only possible because of the '*demos*' who is always already there. The *demos* which "erects a sphere for the name of the people to appear, the unequal count of this people who is both whole and part at the same time, the paradoxical revelation of the dispute by a part of the community that identifies with the whole in the very name of the wrong that makes it the other party."<sup>43</sup> This *demos*, which in principle embodies equality and whose actuality political philosophy always attempts to suppress, is the real center of politics.

Rancière opposes Plato and Aristotle's justification of social hierarchy by arguing that politics presupposes equality, not in terms of economic or social distribution of wealth but in the radical equality of anyone to everyone. Everyone thinks, and inasmuch as everyone thinks, everyone is also equally capable of speech. From this line of argument follows that everyone is entitled to participate in politics. The work of Rancière is anchored on the understanding that from the very beginning, the issue is not the opposition of equality with inequality but in a definition of politics that presupposes equality. In another work, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière writes, "Equality is not a goal to be attained but a point of departure, a supposition to be maintained in all circumstance."<sup>44</sup> Equality is a status from which people need to be seen. It is the very condition that makes politics possible as it is the basis of a capacity to confront the hierarchical division set up by the logic of the police and make visible the fact that everyone stands on the same equal ground. For Rancière, real politics is intrinsically linked to equality.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, translated by Kristin Ross (California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 138.

<sup>45</sup> Todd May, "Wrong, Disagreement, Subjectification" in *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, 70.

Furthermore, for Rancière, equality is not an external property that comes from the possession of wealth, power, status, or intelligence. It is that which is common to every living being by virtue of the fact that he or she is living in the world, and has the capacity to perceive this world and the ability to think and finally to express thoughts in speech. Inequalities are brought about by the kind of politics that builds upon social hierarchies, but the truth is that there are no justifications for this hierarchical organization of the polis.

To demonstrate the power of equality, Rancière uses the now famous example of Ballanche's retelling of the workers' revolt on the Aventine hill. Pierre-Simon Ballanche critiques Livy's account of the *secessio plebis* on the Aventine hill for the latter's failure to recognize the real issue of equality that the plebeians were fighting for. Using this narrative, Rancière shows how a group of workers demanded to be treated as equal to their masters by demanding representation in the government of their masters.<sup>46</sup> Through this act, the workers demanded the recognition of their equality with their masters who originally insisted on excluding them from participation because they are likened to animals incapable of logos or speech. In this example, the Patricians deprived the plebeians of the recognition of their capacity to speech. They were treated as nameless beings who did not need to be "counted" as actual parts of the polis. However, they insisted to be recognized and counted by conducting themselves like "beings with names," and asserted that they be allowed participation in the government. The plebeians acted as if they were equal to the patricians by confronting the latter through speech thus demonstrating that they are also human beings and not beasts.

Politics unfolds as the *demos* interrupts the logic by which those who have a title to govern exercise their dominion over others. And because the *demos* does this by confronting the established hierarchy, it becomes a contestation of the police order. The *demos* introduces "a

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<sup>46</sup> The *secessio plebis* is an event in ancient Roman political and social history between 495 and 493 BC, which involves a dispute between the Patrician ruling class and the Plebeian underclass. It was one of a number of secessions by the plebs and part of a broader political conflict known as the conflict of the orders. In Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Plebeian* (February 26, 2014) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/plebeian>> (accessed March 2016).

heterogeneous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day itself, demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being.”<sup>47</sup> In this confrontation between the equality embodied by the *demos* and the inequality of the social hierarchy guarded by the police, the staging of politics takes place.<sup>48</sup>

Rancière argues that politics only occurs when mechanisms that introduce inequality are interrupted by “the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone.”<sup>49</sup> In this sense, the *demos* plays a crucial role in the establishment of politics as much as it lays down equality as the prerequisite of politics. From police as the kind of politics that creates a hierarchical division based on social roles, the *demos* becomes the very entity that goes against the police and therefore, in the process, institutes the practice of equality in democracy as real politics.

The *demos* thereby performs two important tasks in the staging of politics. First, it is the part of the community responsible for laying down equality as the prerequisite of politics. It sets the condition of equality of everyone before politics can take place. In contrast to other political models which argue that equality is yet to be gained and given, and protected by the state, the *demos*, by rising up and making itself known, and claiming its part in the community, is at the same time demonstrating its equality with everyone. This is tantamount to saying *I am nobody, I have no entitlements, I can only speak, and I am confronting you because we are equal, and I have as much rights to speak as you do*. In principle, the *demos* identifies the wrong, the miscount, the misfit, and the exclusion through the assertion of equality.

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<sup>47</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, .30.

<sup>48</sup> Samuel Chambers has done an extensive discussion of the notion of politics in Rancière. He also engages on a serious debate with other thinkers who have interpreted Rancière. See Samuel Chambers (2005, 2011, 2012, 2013).

<sup>49</sup> The exact quote states, “Politics occurs when these mechanisms are stopped in their tracks by the effect of a presupposition that is totally foreign to them yet without which none of them, could ultimately function: the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone, or the paradoxical effectiveness of the sheer contingency of any order.” Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 17.

The second task of the *demos* is to reveal the political order's lack of an *arkhe*.<sup>50</sup> By claiming its part in the community, the *demos* is able to disclose the true character of the foundation on which the hierarchical division in the state stands. The *demos* reveals that politics does not stand on any firm ground and that the ground on which it stands is fundamentally empty and lacking an *arkhe*. Rancière explains: "The foundation of politics is not, in fact, more a matter of convention than of nature: it is the lack of foundation, the sheer contingency of any social order. Politics exists simply because no social order is based on nature, no divine law regulates human society."<sup>51</sup> Thus, whatever hierarchy has been established does not have any foundation that could be fully justified.

Real politics therefore implies the tension of the relationship between those who rule based upon an unfounded *arkhe* and those who question the rule of the master revealing the fundamental truth about the lack of the foundation of the *arkhe*. The truth revealed by the *demos* is that there is no universal foundation for all established orders. "Democracy is the specific situation in which it is the absence of entitlement that entitles one to exercise the *arkhe*".<sup>52</sup>

The anonymity of the *demos* and the lack of anything, for instance, wealth, title, power, and names have the capacity to disrupt an existing order by revealing that such social orders stand on nothing but the illusion of a foundation. The moment the *demos* raises its voice and makes its existence known, it shakes the ground on which an existing order stands. Real politics exists when the institution of the part who has no part interrupts the natural order of domination.<sup>53</sup> True politics therefore is the politics of the *demos*, the part of those who have no part taking part. It is the moment when those who are excluded from participation demand that they be heard regardless of

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<sup>50</sup> This is derived from a Greek word which means foundation, origin or beginning. In the context of Rancière's work, it pertains to the 'basis' of politics.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 16.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

their lack of entitlement on the basis of an inherent equality.<sup>54</sup> The essence of politics is inherently a democracy, and such a democracy is possible because of the intrinsic equality of anyone to everyone.<sup>55</sup>

## Politics, Political Subjectivity, and Disagreement

Having explained Rancière's central position about politics as democracy in the previous section, I will now proceed to the heart of my thesis problem, which is on political subjectivity. Specifically, I will investigate how subjects are involved in all the political processes discussed earlier, namely processes of social inclusion, of political contestation, and of the reconfiguration of the social field based on these contestations.

Previously, I highlighted Rancière's claim that contrary to the political philosophies of Plato and Aristotle which have established politics on the capacity of human beings for speech, real politics is a quarrel over who has the right to be counted as speaking beings. It is therefore a dispute about whose speech should be recognized as valid and worthy of attention. By speaking up and exercising their equality of intelligence, those who have been excluded from the count based on an absent *arkhe* can pinpoint the misconception of exclusion caused by organizing societies according to social qualifications such as birth, social class, and the like.

The exercise of equality through the discursive act of speech is a moment of politics that is, at the same time, a process of subjectivation or the formation of the subject of politics that is an embodiment of equality. In *Disagreement*, Rancière writes:

By *subjectivation* I mean the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Democracy in What State, Democracies against Democracy: An Interview with Eric Hazan, New Directions in Critical Theory*, Amy Allen gen. ed. Translations from the French by William McCuaig, (New York: Columbia University Press 2011).

<sup>56</sup> Translation slightly altered based on the original French text in *La mésentente* where Rancière used the term "subjectivation" instead of subjectification. This is the basis of my use of subjectivation instead of

There are two identifiable dimensions of subjectivation in this passage. One is subjectivation as the action of a body, which alters the field of experience through its demand for recognition. The other, which has become the distinctive character of Rancière's subject refers to the subject's capacity for enunciation as demonstrated through disagreement. For Rancière, politics takes place through the emergence of a political subject whose defining activity is to pinpoint the wrong in existing structures of hierarchies and order. Rancière states that: "Politics is a matter of subjects or, rather modes of subjectivation."<sup>57</sup> It is about making political subjects in which a subject is formed in relation to an other that is originally excluded or considered as an outcast or those who are denied recognition by the police order (i.e., those who are part of the miscount—the poor, the proletarian, colored people, women, and the like). The political subject is an individual who places himself at one of the points where the wrong of the community is disclosed, and she eventually acts on it. Her action as described in the passage, is initially discursive; it is a demand for recognition and inclusion that first becomes possible by reclaiming the right to speak. On the basis of that discursive action, other political actions follow such as organizing strikes, building barricades, or insisting on using the night for engaging in activities untypical of a worker.

This is a thought-provoking claim by Rancière that suggests an alternative way of looking at politics through hyper-individualized moments of subjectivity—a politics that is localized, particular, specific, and concrete as it zooms into moments in which individuals decide to perform actions unexpected of them based on their perceived social class or identification. Such a unique claim that politics is about making subjects allows us to think about real politics, that is, democratic struggles for social inclusion, and to conceive ways in which it defines new modes of being subjects. This interesting claim is the very reason why I am using Rancière among other theorists

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subjectification and subjectivization except in Rancière's article in English where he uses subjectivization. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 35.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

of politics who regard politics as mainly about power struggle between the elements of the state, the rules of governing a state, or a force that makes way for a new group of people to come.

Political subjectivity is “a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order through a demonstration of equality of intelligence.”<sup>58</sup> What the subject does is to demonstrate its equality of intelligence through speech that, in turn, alters what is visible, speakable, and doable in the community, for it introduces new ways of seeing, speaking, and being which have been previously ignored. Here we see that for Rancière, the subject is the embodiment of equality. Equality becomes real and concrete through the subject whose action is a demand for such equality to be recognized. Rancière asserts: “Political subjectivation is the enactment of equality—or the handling of a wrong—by people who are together to the extent that they are between.”<sup>59</sup>

At the moment of confrontation between equality and the hierarchical logic of the police, the subject becomes an operator who connects and disconnects “different areas, regions, identities, functions, and capacities existing in the configuration of a given experience—that is, in the nexus of distributions of the police order and whatever equality is already inscribed there, however fragile and fleeting such inscriptions may be.”<sup>60</sup> This leads to the production of speaking bodies not identifiable with a previously existing field of experience, and who come into existence to change the very configuration of these existing fields of experience.<sup>61</sup> Thus, speaking subjects are performatively produced by something that subjects do themselves. The moment a subject, who is previously anonymous and unrecognized, rises up to denounce injustice, she creates herself as a

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>59</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization.” *The Identity in Question* 61, (1992): 61 doi:10.2307/778785.

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 40.

<sup>61</sup> The original quote states: By subjectification, I mean the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 35-36.



political subject. It is that moment when you show the possibility of being a subject where you are not supposed to be one, which defines you as a political subject.

Subjectivation is a moment of political dissensus and disagreement in which a new world is opened up, a new world that is a common world where both the uncounted and the counted coexist. Indeed, this theory of political subjectivity is unique because it shows the concrete instances where individuals become political subjects by being a body that speaks.<sup>62</sup> Contrary to criticisms of Rancière which claim that his theory of politics and political subject is abstract as it fails to organize and strategize political action or that it is passive and entirely based on chance,<sup>63</sup> the subject's assertion of its equality, which is done in numerous possible ways and in unexpected moments, as shown by Rancière in several of his writings, proves that these criticisms should be taken with a certain degree of skepticism specially if one has only read his more famous texts such as *Disagreement*. In fact, Rancière has demonstrated in his writings specially the early ones that politics happens in the real lives of individuals who struggle to be counted for participation. And against the criticism that his notion of emancipation cannot be universalized and institutionalized, Rancière's work itself is a critique of institutionalized and organized politics because he capitalizes on the importance of the power of spatio-temporal arrests of the senses as a mode of political contestation. Often, this stopping of mechanical logic and linear time becomes more powerful when it is unorganized or unexpected.

As a direct consequence of the process of subjectivation, the subject must be an empty subject. Rancière describes it as an 'in between' identification<sup>64</sup>; thus, it is not a fixed ontological

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<sup>62</sup> Although, this Rancièrian position sounds very close to Badiou, the central differentiating factor lies in the notion of the subject itself. For Badiou, the subject exists before politics. The subject's encounter with truth, experience or event compels it to "decide a new way of being" and "invent a new way of acting" See Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, translated and introduced by Peter Hallward (London, New York: Verso, 2012) 41-42. Whereas the subject for Badiou is an ontological fact, for Rancière on the other hand, the subject only begins to exist the moment that it speaks up and confronts the hierarchical order. Hence it is dependent on the forms of exclusion that it points out and is always in a process of becoming.

<sup>63</sup> See for example Yves Citton (2009), Peter Hallward (2009), Paulina Tambakaki (2009), Jodi Dean (2009).

<sup>64</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," 61.

entity as it is continuously in the process of dis-identification. It is not a well-established ontological agent who first has to exist before politics can ensue, but an actor who emerges during political moments. This political subject of Rancière does not have a fixed identity but moves in between identities as it escapes the casting of labels and roles, giving it the freedom to assert itself anytime the occasion calls for it to do so. The effectiveness of a political subject as an agent of politics relies on her assertion of equality that entails denouncing of identities, capacities, habits, desires, and labels defined by the police and afterward creates new subjectivities that do not belong to any particular identities or groups.

Rancière describes the subject as “a surplus subject”<sup>65</sup> who is not a collective body but, in fact, defines itself by demonstrating the gap between the common world of equality and the world of the excluded. It is an empty subject that is not defined by any social science such as psychology, history, or sociology whose act of reclaiming its capacity for speech is a pure embodiment of equality. And instead a series of operations and relations that opens up and connects worlds “where the subject who argues is counted as an arguer.”<sup>66</sup> Initially, the discursive linguistic performance of the subject is its defining characteristic.

The process of political subjectivation becomes possible first through speech, and the subject borne out of this process is an empty subject. These predominant positions in his later and famous writings on politics (i.e., *Disagreement* and *On the Shores of Politics*) are the central categories in Rancière’s mainstream orthodox writings that I want to challenge in the next few chapters of this thesis. Rancière is a brilliant political theorist because he shows how politics is about creating subjects, and yet in his mainstream orthodox writings, he insists that politics is discursive and that subjects are empty. What I want to argue is that in spite of his now-famous claims in his late political writings about the subject being empty, he, in fact, gives a rich account

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 59.

of political subjectivity in his early works, some of which are not widely read. Before this could be done, I will first explain how politics through subjectivation takes place, that is, through what Rancière calls the act of disagreement.

## **Disagreement**

Disagreement is the enactment of dissensus or the denunciation of the wrong by the subject and is therefore the moment when subjects are created. It pertains both to the linguistic and the performative act of the *subject* to institute itself as part of the discourse from which it is originally excluded. It makes obvious the fact that politics is all about the inclusion of the part that has no part. Through disagreement, which is primarily a linguistic act, it becomes possible for anyone to rise up to challenge how hierarchies have been established and how divisions have been set up. The subject makes it a point that she is making a voice heard and known and is not being set aside like an animal. Hence, it is fundamentally a speech act that opens the stage for the subject to be heard and recognized. From the act of speaking, other actions that equally have the same demand for recognition or inclusion may follow. In this sense, disagreement allows for the “assertion of a common world through a paradoxical mise-en-scène that brings the community and the non-community together.”<sup>67</sup> As disagreement dismantles established arrangements of worlds and accepted language, it also “redistributes the way speaking bodies are distributed in an articulation between the order of saying, the order of doing and the order of being.”<sup>68</sup> By highlighting the importance of disagreement in politics, it is evident that for Rancière, the redistribution of bodies predominantly relies on a discursive linguistic move.

*Disagreement* (1995) where Rancière describes politics as the act of disagreement contains his stand on contemporary politics in which he breaks away from Habermas’s linguistic-pragmatic

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<sup>67</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 55.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

paradigm<sup>69</sup> and offers an alternative notion of political speech that is founded on the “rationality of disagreement.”<sup>70</sup> Contrary to Habermas who assumes that political rationality relies upon the *a priori* possibility of consensus, that is itself inscribed in the logic of speech acts, Rancière argues that “Political rationality is only thinkable precisely on condition that it be freed from the alternative in which a certain rationalism would like to keep it reined in,..”<sup>71</sup> For politics, which possesses a logic that is based on a duality of speech, i.e., speech as logos and speech as an account of speech, disagreement as a demand for recognition through speech is a must because only then can it be assured that politics will open a world to those who have been excluded in the count. Presupposing “understanding” as what Habermas argues in his theory of communicative action, in fact, makes visible the division between those who are involved in the dialogue according to Rancière. The question “do you understand?” presupposes either that there is nothing for the hearer to understand or the hearer must obey an order because he understood. In both ways, there is a hierarchical relationship between the one who asks the question and the listener who is being asked.

Nevertheless, Rancière, like Habermas, regards language, as manifested in speech, a fundamental element of politics. The workers who insisted on being treated as human beings like their masters were only able to do so through language. The term *disagreement* is the English translation of the French word *mésentente*, which could possibly mean two things: (1) to mishear or to misunderstand and (2) to disagree. The former refers to the auditory and cognitive aspect of the term similar to the state of not being able to hear and understand something correctly. The

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<sup>69</sup> Habermas’ communicative action centers on consensus as the goal of politics which could be achieved through communicative rationality. For secondary literature on the Habermas-Rancière connection, see Matheson Russel and Andrew Montin, “The Rationality of Political Disagreement: Rancière’s Critique of Habermas” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 22. No.4 (2015):543-554. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12174>

<sup>70</sup> *Disagreement*, 43.

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

latter, on the other hand, connotes the performative aspect of the term and is therefore active inasmuch as there is agency involved in the act.

In the act of disagreement, Rancière shows how equality serves as the foundation of politics. The subjects will always demand to be part of the count through the assertion of a capacity to speak even if the social hierarchy set up by the police excludes them from it. The model of the *secessio plebis* demonstrates the issue of a denial to recognize the equality of the Plebeians that they successfully negated through the act of disagreement. Rancière writes: “An extreme form of disagreement is where X cannot see the common object Y is presenting because X cannot comprehend that the sounds uttered by Y form words and chain of words similar to X’s own. This extreme situation –first and foremost- concerns politics.”<sup>72</sup> Disagreement, therefore, relies heavily on speech where speech is a demand to be heard, recognized, and included without the presupposition of a certain form of rationality and a state of understanding between two parties. Instead, the starting point of disagreement is the ontological state of equality between two parties.

Following the logic of politics in Rancière, political rationality is founded on the equality of intelligence. As beings of equal intelligence, everyone has the inherent capacity to speak her mind and to engage in discourse. Politics is likewise an event borne out of an unexpected moment, which is made possible by the subject. Disagreement is the concept used by Rancière to explain that politics is never about any anthropological variable that separates human beings from animals such as speech. In politics, utterances are not exclusive to two subjects who need to concur; rather, utterances are meant to bring up subjectivity to be able to dispute about participation in the sense of how a subject understands the same concept. Disagreement does not pertain to a quarrel about a particular issue. It is about asserting that one’s speech ought to be heard because one possesses an intelligence that is equal to everyone else. Disagreement opens up worlds by shifting bodies and inventing new ways of visibility, speakability, and doability where the counted and the uncounted meet.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., xii.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided a reconstruction of Rancière's project of reformulating politics as democracy where politics is the assertion of equality to contest miscount and exclusion. Politics, for Rancière, is an activity that takes place when the subject asserts her place in discourse by challenging the police order through the assertion of her equality, thereby revealing the foundationlessness of the *arkhe* on which society stands. This demonstrates the nature of politics as disruptive because it is focused on challenging, questioning, or interrogating the established order. The most relevant question for politics is the demonstration of one's entitlement to participation through speech that is recognized by the other as speech, not merely the sound created by an animal. What the subject therefore brings to the process of politics is a speaking contention through the act of disagreement. Disagreement, the true political act, is not a simple debate over who is right or wrong, but a question of who gets to speak.

The act of disagreement defines the political subject as one who takes a leap by speaking up and making known a fundamental presupposition for Rancière, that is the equality of intelligence. Disagreement is a staging of equality. It is contesting a political stance not only in language or through the assertion of the capacity for speech but by demanding space, a quarrel over the common facts of existence.<sup>73</sup> Most importantly, it is through disagreement that a political subject becomes a subject.

Thus, to be a political subject, in *Disagreement* at least, is to be an active agent whose main goal is the disclosure of contradictions to create a scene for politics to happen. The main tool of the political subject is disagreement through speech. The active agent of politics does not have an identity; in fact, it is a product of dis-identification, and is thus an empty subject. The subject's relation to the other is established through participation in the political scene. The subject is a

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<sup>73</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Introducing Disagreement*, 5.

supplementary part of politics through which the count of the uncounted is recognized. The existence of the subject only becomes possible through the absence of an entitlement.

A subject is an individual who at one time decides to rise up, but in rising up, she does not represent any fixed identity because that would assume precisely what is risen up against or an ostensible *arkhe* that is in fact without a foundation. Inequality would thus return in the very assertion of equality. In *Dissensus*, Rancière stresses, “political subjectivation entails breaking apart from the logic of the *arkhe*.”<sup>74</sup> Subjectivation, for Rancière, is mainly a process of disidentification, that is, “a removal from the naturalness of a place, the opening up of a subject space where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted, where a connection is made between having a part and having no part.”<sup>75</sup> Political subjectivation is an active capacity of the subject to create polemical scenes that bring out the contradiction between two logics by positing existences which are, at the same time, nonexistences, or nonexistences which are, at the same time, existences.<sup>76</sup> When a subject identifies with a group to which it does not, by nature or social dictate, belong, in order to denounce an injustice, the political subject emerges. For instance, at the height of 1968 student revolts in France, students started proclaiming that they were “German Jews.” They created a name for themselves and in the process, decried their exclusion. Rancière describes this process as “a crossing of identities, relying on a crossing of names: names link the name of a group or class to the name of no group or no class, a being to a nonbeing or a not-yet being.”<sup>77</sup> This act of naming and counter-naming is a political act that again demonstrates how important discourse is for Rancière’s idea of politics.

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<sup>74</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, translated by Steven Corcoran, (London: Continuum, 2011), 37.

<sup>75</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 38.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>77</sup> Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization,” 61.

Significantly, Rancière reminds us of the importance of a return to politics that highlights the role of political agency and the equality of intelligence. Classical political philosophy and other political models which are dismissive of ordinary people and which favor the views of elite intellectual thinkers neglect the experiences of the ordinary people that belong to the *demos*. Rancière wants to say that, “Politics exist by virtue of the democratic mobilization of this apparatus of appearance, imparity, and grievance. This means that it does not exist simply because of the power of the state.”<sup>78</sup> Politics exists because of the individual parts, the actors that move within it and create the conditions for it to become possible. Through his invocation of equality, Rancière returns politics to its basic constitution: the individual that comprises what is collectively known as “the people.”

Rancière argues that politics rarely happens to the point that it has the character of being an accident, and it owes this accidental character to the political subject who actively deviates from the existing given order. In *Dissensus*, Rancière contends: “Politics is a provisional accident within the history of the forms of domination. It is this anomaly that is expressed in the nature of political subjects, which are not social groups but rather forms of inscription that account for the unaccounted.”<sup>79</sup> Politics is a rare activity that only takes place when there is a confrontation between the equality embodied by the people and the social hierarchy manifested by the police.

Indeed, Rancière’s project of re-configuring politics as the democratic assertion of the subject’s equality is unique in many ways. In this process of re-thinking democracy and re-founding it in the act of disagreement which is fundamentally a combination of an embodied struggle for speech, democracy is detached from the idea of being a form of managing society which has made it synonymous with liberal consensus democracy. Rancière’s re-definition of politics opens up the path for an alternative theory on politics<sup>80</sup> against the definition of democracy,

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<sup>78</sup> Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, 7.

<sup>79</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Ten Theses on Politics*, 35.

<sup>80</sup> Samuel Chambers, “Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 10, no 3 (July 2011), 307 doi:10.1177/1474885111406386.



which has been reduced to a distribution of lots. It also allows us to recognize and understand the emergence of spontaneous collective movements, political contestations, sometimes violent which have been characteristic of modern democratic politics.

*Disagreement* and *On the Shores of Politics* present a view of politics that is evental and a political subjectivity that is empty. Most interpretations of Rancière that follow this line of thinking end up with the criticism that his re-formulation of democracy although significantly, appealing falls short of action and lacks the capacity to imagine the possibility of a revolution. These readings also overemphasize on the problem of how to read Rancière's idea of politics properly rather than direct the attention to other interesting aspects of his writings from which there is a rich material that can be drawn out. I will argue against these readings and claim that in spite of what Rancière himself seemingly says about politics as predominantly discursive, he in fact has a rich theory of political subjectivity that involves affects, bodies, will, and dreams, which makes this notion of political subject concrete and so much more than merely a speaking subject. I will endeavor to explicate my claim in the succeeding few chapters of this thesis as I explore the other writings of Rancière where he constantly cites and repeats the words of the people sometimes caught unaware of his own shift in discourse. In these writings, Rancière is no longer someone who merely talks about politics as speech and the political subject as an empty operator but as a subject who has experiences, dreams, affects, and bodies.

## Chapter 2

### The Seeds of Politics as Political Subjectivity in the Young Rancière

This chapter is a discussion of the beginnings of Rancière's political thought going back to the 1960s when he was a student of Louis Althusser at the École normale supérieure (ENS). When Rancière started as an Althusserian Marxist, his views on politics, i.e., the subject and the process of subjectivation, were entirely different from how he would perceive these concepts in the next five decades of his philosophical career. This is what makes this early period so important. The cause that he would work for in his entire 50 years of philosophy has been largely influenced by this initial engagement and the fundamental shift, triggered by the experience in 1968, which saw him move from an Althusserian conception of politics and political subjectivation to his own, Rancièrian view. These are the reasons why it is important to focus on these early writings because here we can observe how Rancière began to transition to his own mature ideas about politics.

Equality, the central concept of Rancière's thought, is not entirely explicit in these early works because he was rigorously following Althusser's structuralist reading of Marx, which goes against this very notion. Adhering to the Althusserian reading of Marx's work wherein Althusser argues about an epistemological break between the early Marx and the late Marx, Rancière wrote his chapter in *Reading Capital*<sup>81</sup>, the first of the seminars organized by Althusser on Marx's *Capital*, according to the model of the epistemological break. Rancière's first chapter discussed the concept of 'critique' in the early Marx, while the second chapter discussed the same concept but this time in *Capital*, read as the text in which scientific Marxism is presented.

It was precisely this close involvement with Althusser that would steer Rancière a few years later in the direction of criticizing a model of philosophy as an elitist method of social critique. Rancière realized that the Althusserian model of theoretical practice would never lead to

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<sup>81</sup> Louis Althusser, et al., *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, translated by Ben Brewster and David Fernback (London: Verso, 2015).

social transformation. It was on the basis of his critique of this model that he began to develop his method of Equality. An essential component of the method of Equality is the recognition of the capacity of political subjects to think and speak for themselves. However, in the early phase of his thoughts, particularly his chapters in *Reading Capital*, there was no regard for the individual subject and the first-person perspective on social life. Following Althusser, the subject is described as caught up in a structure, which it is entirely incapable of making sense. The subject is “mystified” and furthermore incapable of thinking for itself. The subject is the bearer of ideology that is fully embedded in the structure of capitalist production and is defined by this very function within the structure. Because it is incapable of recognizing ideologies surrounding it, as it is “mystified” (the term that Rancière uses),<sup>82</sup> there is a need therefore for an emancipator, a role that is supposed to be played by the intellectual master, i.e., the philosopher. Amidst the commotion in May 1968, Rancière witnessed firsthand how the workers took up their cause to the streets not because they were following the advice of intellectuals providing them with a theoretical understanding of their situation but because of their understanding of their own situation. The unfolding of historical events, together with his intellectual beginnings, prompted Rancière to begin turning his philosophy toward a new trajectory, which was distant, indeed opposed to that of Althusser’s.

In this chapter, I will discuss how Rancière’s initial work on politics was already focused on political subjectivity. Even when he had a completely different position about the works of Marx in the late 50s and early 60s, his tracing of the epistemological break in *Capital* is connected to the subject’s experience of alienation. He was occupied with what becomes of the anthropological problematic in Marx’s 1844 texts.<sup>83</sup> For Rancière, Marx’s treatment of alienation

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<sup>82</sup> *Reading Capital* grounds this autonomy on the thesis that agents of production are necessarily deluded. By agents of production, we are to understand proletarians and capitalists, since both are simply the agents of capitalist relations of production and both are mystified by the illusions produced by their practices. See Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, trans by Emiliano Battista (London and New York, Continuum, 2011), 47.

<sup>83</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Critique and Science in *Capital*,” in *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, translated by Ben Brewster and David Fernback (London: Verso, 2015), 101.

is a crucial take-off point for the epistemological break. It is from this subjective experience of alienation that Rancière began his preoccupation with the life of the political subject involved in the class struggle. Here, we are able to see that even when he was just beginning to take up the problems that he would work on in his mature theoretical position, the notion of subjectivity was essential in his thinking about politics. This chapter attempts to expound the events, motivations, and ideas that drove Rancière's philosophy early on and how these contributed to his mature notion of political subjectivity. In the next few sections, I will be talking about Rancière biographically in order to show the chronology of how specific events contributed to the development of his ideas on politics and political subjectivity. This method is important particularly for my interest on how Rancière developed his notion of political subjectivity in his early works.

## Early Intellectual Life

When Rancière started out as a student, he was not keen on taking philosophy. *The Method of Equality*, a collection of interviews with Rancière on his intellectual development, describes his entrance into philosophy as “taking a plunge.”<sup>84</sup> The young Rancière dreamt of becoming an archaeologist, but by the time he went to the ENS, he had shed off that dream and was torn between the choice of taking either philosophy or literature. His academic preparation allowed him to encounter the novels and protest plays of the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre<sup>85</sup> through which he was then introduced to the writings of Karl Marx. Sartre and Marx awoke in Rancière a general interest in philosophical inquiry that was already focused on the human person i.e., alienation, freedom, and absurdity. In one of the interviews, Rancière describes his initial encounter with Marx in the following way:

I first came to Marx because the school chaplain showed me a book he was enjoying reading, Calvez's book on Marx (*La Pensée de Karl Marx*, 1956). That

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<sup>84</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality: Interviews with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan*, translated by Julie Rose (UK/USA: Polity Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>85</sup> See the works of Devin Zane Shaw (2010, 2012, 2016), Christina Howells (2011) and Robert Boncardo (2018) for comprehensive discussions on the Rancière-Sartre connection.

means I first got interested in Marx through all the themes that Althusserianism later brushed aside, notably the critique of alienation. I also discovered Marx through Sartre, since my first way into philosophy was via Sartre's novels and protest plays.<sup>86</sup>

Moreover, in his initial encounter with the works of Marx, Rancière describes himself as particularly attracted to the lyricism of the latter's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*:

So I began my DESS [Diplôme d'Etudes Supérieures Spécialisées] on the boundary between two worlds of thought, since, on the one hand, I was already more or less part of the enthusiastic uptake of the essays of the young Marx with all that was lyrical about essays like the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, which sort of corresponded to my idea of the time, to a philosophy that emerges from itself and becomes a way of life, a world.<sup>87</sup>

In early 1960s, Rancière, thus started studying the early works of Marx, particularly those about 'critical thought.' He was interested in Marxist philosophy as a method of thinking that is directed toward social transformation. Here, we find Rancière engrossed with the young Marx who writes about workers as human beings experiencing alienation and longing for freedom. This original motivation would, however change upon encountering Louis Althusser.

## Meeting Althusser

Rancière met Louis Althusser when he entered the doors of one of the premier academic institutions of France, the École normale supérieure (ENS). This meeting proved to be life-defining for the young Rancière who, at that time, still had no clear vision of the trajectory that he would take in philosophy. It was through Althusser that Rancière learned a different reading of Marx, a reading that was totally opposite from his first encounter with Marx's early texts. This would mitigate the original impetus of his works and would bring him to a direction that is different from the initial path he had taken.

Upon the encounter with Althusser's work, Rancière's interest on critical thought was now to be approached from the path of scientific Marxism, which meant, in particular, setting aside the

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<sup>86</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality*, 3.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

notion of subjectivity as a central element of the method. Moreover, it also meant dismissing the early works of Marx, which, for this “scientific” reading, were full of mistaken anthropological references. To have a clear view of this decisive encounter, it is worthwhile to briefly present Althusser's approach to Marxist philosophy.

### **Althusser's Project**

In 1960s France, Louis Althusser was the stellar figure of philosophy at the ENS. Althusser is fondly described as a pioneer in opening the gates of ENS to new theoretical perspectives such as linguistics, psychoanalysis, and structural anthropology. These perspectives served as a breath of fresh air for “normaliens” who, for several years, had been saturated with phenomenology. Through Althusser's efforts, the students were introduced to a “living” philosophy, which could be used for the transformation of society.<sup>88</sup> Althusser provided these young intellectuals with the inspiration of a possibility, that of a “real involvement as intellectuals transforming the world.”<sup>89</sup>

Althusser was the agrégé-répétiteur<sup>90</sup> at the École normale supérieure who had direct influence on the preparation of the students for their “agrégation.” He was in charge of organizing seminars for the research training of the young normaliens. He was also the official philosopher of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF). These positions had specific implications for the direction of his work as he would use philosophy to extract a pure theory of Marxism by uncovering the elements that would establish it as “the philosophy” of social revolution in order to provide the party with a strong theoretical background.

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<sup>88</sup> Philosophy became Althusser's primary tool in dealing with political realities having established it as the theoretical practice or intervention in politics. See Oliver Davis, *Jacques Rancière, Key Contemporary Thinkers* (UK/USA: Polity Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>89</sup> Jacques Rancière, *La Leçon d'Althusser* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974) : 89, quoted in *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>90</sup> The Agrégé-répétiteur is responsible for preparing the students for their aggregation. Normaliens often use the slang term *caïman* to refer to an academic supervisor at ENS. Althusser taught at ENS from 1948 to 1980.

Althusser was deeply immersed in a project of extracting a Marxist science to strengthen the stand of the PCF but, at the same time, to escape from the theoretical oppression of the party.<sup>91</sup> This was a purpose that he fulfilled by organizing seminars at the ENS and by publishing articles that were then compiled into books. Althusser's effort of extracting a Marxist science from the work of Marx can be seen in the texts he wrote in the 1960s such as *For Marx*; *Reading Capital*; and "Theory, Theoretical Practice, Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle."<sup>92</sup> Specifically, in these works, he embarked on a reading of Marx that rejects the early writings of the latter, which are centered on a humanist critique of capitalism.

In contrast to the anthropological interpretation of the writings of the young Marx, Althusser's rereading lead him to the latter's mature works. From this project, he concludes that what can be called as a Marxist science is a science of history (historical materialism), which eventually induced a revolution in philosophy and developed into the method of Dialectical Materialism.<sup>93</sup> Marx's greatest contribution to the history of ideas is a scientific method of understanding society that allows the study of processes and structures of society revealing the ideologies embedded within it. In this case, Marx is likened by Althusser to Galileo and Thales who each introduced a new science to their respective disciplines just as Marx did in history.<sup>94</sup> The

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<sup>91</sup> PCF in the 1960's has very strong anthropological leanings. This in Althusser's mind is making the party weak because it fails to establish itself as a science. See William Lewis, *Louis Althusser and the traditions of French Marxism*, (UK: Lexington Books, 2005).

<sup>92</sup> Louis Althusser, "Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle," in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*, ed. Gregory Elliott, trans. James H. Kavanagh (London: Verso, 1990).

<sup>93</sup> Louis Althusser 1968 Interview, Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon (Written: February 1968; First Published: in *L'Unità*, 1968, this translation first published in *New Left Review*, 1971; Interview conducted by Maria Antonietta Macciocchi) in <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1968/philosophy-as-weapon.htm>> accessed September 2016.

<sup>94</sup> The complete quote states, "Indeed, in conformity with the tradition constantly reiterated by the classics of Marxism, we may claim that Marx established a new science: the science of the history of 'social formations.' To be more precise, I should say that Marx 'opened up' for scientific knowledge a new 'continent,' that of history - just as Thales opened up the 'continent' of mathematics for scientific knowledge, and Galileo opened up the 'continent' of physical nature for scientific knowledge." See, Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster (UK: NLB, 1977), 14.

problem, however, is that this science, although present within the works of Marx, is not explicit and therefore needs to be extracted.

Broadly speaking, the work of Althusser revolves around the objective of making explicit this vital contribution of Marx to the science of history. He thus regards his work as a double intervention. The first intervention consists of separating Marxist theory from various forms of philosophical subjectivism that have threatened it in the past.<sup>95</sup> The second, on the other hand, intends to find the true theoretical basis of the Marxist science of history and Marxist philosophy in contrast to the idealist notions that burden the early interpretations of Marx.<sup>96</sup> Althusserian Marxism therefore took the form of an epistemology with its task being "the elaboration of concepts and theses which would permit the demarcation of science from other kinds of theoretical discourse."<sup>97</sup> Althusser explains this double intervention in the following passage:

Behind the detail of the arguments, textual analyses, and theoretical discussions, these two interventions reveal a major opposition, the opposition that separates science from ideology or more precisely, that separates a new science in process of self-constitution from the pre-scientific theoretical ideologies that occupy the 'terrain' in which it is establishing itself. This is an important point; what we are dealing with in the opposition science/ ideologies concerns the 'break' relationship between a science and the *theoretical* ideology in which the object it gave the knowledge of was 'thought' before the foundation of the science.<sup>98</sup>

With this goal of making explicit Marxist science from within the works of Marx, Althusser borrows the concept of an epistemological break (*coupure épistémologique*) from Gaston Bachelard's history of science. Bachelard argues that all sciences undergo a stage of qualitative, historical, and theoretical discontinuity before becoming a fully scientific body of knowledge.<sup>99</sup> Applied to Marx, the theoretical intervention of Althusser reveals the location of the

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<sup>95</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, 12-13.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>97</sup> Paul Patton, "Althusser's Epistemology: the limits of the theory is theoretical practice," *Radical Philosophy* 19 (Spring, 1978): 8 <<https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/article/althussers-epistemology>>

<sup>98</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, 13.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.



epistemological break from the early anthropological Marx steeped with ideology to the mature scientific Marx. Revealing the epistemological break shows the Marxist science of historical materialism and, at the same time, the Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism, which is its theoretical core.

According to this Althusserian reading, the young Marx initially used a humanist framework and then discovered his true method of a theory of history ultimately determined by relationships of material production; this method is known as Historical Materialism. The philosophic method that accompanies this new, scientific theory of history is Dialectical Materialism. Because of the epistemological break, even if similar concepts appear in the early and the mature work, these concepts have different meanings because the theoretical framework within which they operate is completely different. Fulfilling the project of establishing a Marxist science entails that Althusser will have to locate the break between ideology and science in the mature works of Marx, and this is a task he calls a “symptomatic” reading of the writings of the mature Marx. Althusser explains the importance of finding this epistemological break:

This opposition between science and ideology and the notion of an ‘epistemological break’ that helps us to think its historical character refers to a thesis that, although always present in the background of these analyses, is never explicitly developed: the thesis that Marx's discovery is a scientific discovery without historical precedent, in its nature and effects.<sup>100</sup>

The epistemological break could be located through a method of a symptomatic reading. This is a kind of reading, which was borrowed from psychoanalysis, with the premise that, on the basis of existing symptoms, the interpreter can detect that something<sup>101</sup> is buried deep within the unconscious. This method of reading presupposes that the driving force of an existing text may be some hidden or absent concept. Applying this to the work of Marx shows that the shift in the ‘problematic’ of the writings of the mature Marx is symptomatic of the change in the latter’s

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>101</sup> This could be in the form of an unfulfilled wish, a repressed thought or feelings. In the case of Marx, Althusser believes that what has been repressed is the science of Marxism which has already existed as early as the *Manuscripts of 1844* but has been subsumed under anthropological categories.

philosophical problem in his mature writings. Whereas he talks about political economy from the experience of the workers in the *Manuscripts of 1844*, a significant change of discussion about the structure of political economy by describing the processes of production is remarkable in *Capital*. Althusser reads this shift as Marx's break from his earlier ideology-loaded works to an objective and scientific take on the science of the history of political economy. Marx was hardly explicit in providing the details of the shift of his discussion from the workers' experiences of alienation to the structures of political economy nor in specifying a systematic analysis of his ideas on social structure, history, and human nature. To make the shift visible and to extract Marxist science, Althusser's proposed symptomatic entails, "the progressive and systematic production of a reflection of the problematic on its objects such as to make them *visible*, and the illumination, the production of the deepest lying problematic which will allow us to see what could otherwise only have existed allusively or practically."<sup>102</sup>

Aside from locating the epistemological break between science and ideology in the works of Marx themselves, the Althusserian reading of Marx is at the same time an attempt to produce the new science of history using its very object of investigation. Althusser summarizes his project in the following passage where he elaborates on the "symptomatic reading":

May I sum up all of these in a sentence? This sentence describes a circle: a philosophical reading of *Capital* is only possible as the application of that which is the very object of our investigation, Marxist philosophy. This circle is only possible because of the existence of Marx's philosophy in the works of Marxism. It is, therefore, a question of producing, in the precise sense of the word, which seems to signify making manifest what is latent, but which really means transforming (in order to give a pre-existing raw material the form of an object adapted to an end), something which in a sense *already* exists. This production, in the double sense which gives the production operation the necessary form of a circle, *is the production of a knowledge*. To conceive Marx's philosophy in its specificity is therefore to formulate the essence of the very movement with which the knowledge it is produced, or to conceive knowledge as production.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> "I merely proposed a 'symptomatic' reading of the works of Marx and of Marxism, one with another, i.e., the progressive and systematic production of a reflection of the problematic on its objects such as to make them visible, and the illumination, the production of the deepest lying problematic which will allow us to see what could otherwise only have existed allusively or practically." Louis Althusser, "Ideology" in *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, 31.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 33- 34.

In this passage, Althusser articulates an important detail about how he views his reading of Marx. Althusser thinks of his works as a theoretical labor in which the primary goal remains to be production of new knowledge. For Althusser, Marx provides the raw material of the symptomatic reading, and the task of such a reading is to process this raw material and transform it into new knowledge, that is, the philosophy of Historical Materialism. Theory therefore takes on a central position, that of being a Theoretical practice,<sup>104</sup> the practice consists in weeding out the ideology and allowing science to surface. Scientific Marxism is a theoretical practice of enabling Marxist science to surface using the materials Marx himself wrote. As Althusser contends:

I shall call Theory (with a capital T), general theory, that is, the Theory of practice in general, itself elaborated on the basis of the Theory of existing theoretical practices (of the sciences), which transforms into ‘knowledges’ (scientific truths) the ideological product of existing ‘empirical’ practices (the concrete activity of men). This Theory is the materialist *dialectic* which is none other than dialectical materialism.<sup>105</sup>

Science, for Althusser, is primarily “Theoretical practice” since it aims to find the objective explanation behind a phenomenon against an erroneous, “ideological” conceptualization; thereby, it aims to achieve real, “practical” results within and through theory by showing the nullity of the opposite way of defining and describing the object and the wrongful, “real” implications of this alternative method. Science is also an epistemology because its main goal is to produce correct knowledge. Once again, for Althusser, this means showing the correct, materialist view of knowledge as a reflection in theory of real social interests, as opposed to an idealistic conception of knowledge as self-enclosed and separated from society and politics. The task of posing essential questions about the status of other disciplines or practices and criticizing ideology in all its facets,

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<sup>104</sup> There are four kinds of theory for Althusser economic, political, scientific and theoretical.

<sup>105</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 168.

including the technical practice of this ideology, is a task of Theory (in contrast to ideological practice), specifically of the materialist dialectic.<sup>106</sup>

It is through symptomatic reading that Althusser aims to fulfill his double intervention of separating science from ideology and producing a Marxist science. Necessary to this endeavor is a theory of ideology that will serve as the material to be negated by science (theoretical practice). Employing the symptomatic reading of the text, Althusser examines the writings of Marx and extracts a theory of ideology he thinks is compatible with the real scientific Marx. The symptomatic reading hinges on the premise that all sciences begin with ideology and in the words of Althusser, “a ‘pure’ science only exists on condition that it continually frees itself from the ideology which occupies it, haunts it, or lies in wait for it.”<sup>107</sup> Ideology therefore is the raw material that undergoes purification before it can become a science.

There are several layers of ideology that undergoes purification in order to become science according to Althusser. There is ideology at the level of everyday life. To explain this, Althusser borrows the concept of the “imaginary” from Lacanian psychoanalysis and proceeds to define it as, “an imaginary assemblage, a pure dream, empty and vain constituted by the day’s residues from the only full and positive reality, that of the concrete history of concrete material individuals materially producing their existence.”<sup>108</sup> Inasmuch as it is imaginary, for Althusser, ideology manages to constitute material existence as it, “represents the imaginary relations of individuals to the relation of production and the relations that derive from them.”<sup>109</sup> Althusser thinks that ideology has become a necessary part of existence in such a way that it contributes to the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 171-172.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Louis Althusser “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus” in *On Ideology* (London, New York: Verso 2008,) 36.

structuring and organization of material existence.<sup>110</sup> Because this is the case, the ‘subject’ constituted by ideology becomes blind to its own origin and has no capacity to recognize itself or the actual source of what comprises its own experience. This is the famous Althusserian formulation: Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects.’<sup>111</sup> To be a subject is to be dominated by ideology and to be in a state of misrecognition of the social reality thus become instrumental in reproducing forms of domination.<sup>112</sup>

There is also ideology which exists in the sciences of everyday life, and that level results from a scientific yet ideological purification of the material from the first level of ideology. The result of this purification leads to structured knowledge legitimized and constituted as the social sciences, namely history, psychology, sociology, and economics in ideological form. For Althusser, scientifically constituted ideology cannot contribute to true theoretical practice “because most often they only have the unity of a *technical practice*...”<sup>113</sup> The materials that comprise these so-called sciences are themselves ideology and thus for Althusser, cannot constitute a real science that produces new knowledge.

Marxist philosophy or Dialectical Materialism is the meta-reflection and meta-conceptualization of theories via Theoretical labor. According to Althusser, this is the unique contribution of Marx’s mature work in *Capital*, a science of the theory of production of the effect of knowledge by a given theoretical practice. Althusser names this class struggle ‘in theory,’ with emphasis on the “struggle” at the level of theory. This is a theoretical work where Marxist

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<sup>110</sup> Louis Althusser's theory of ideology works in three levels namely, the level of everyday life, the level of the sciences of society and lastly at the level of Theory with a capital "T."

<sup>111</sup> Louis Althusser “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus” in *On Ideology*, 44.

<sup>112</sup> Sotiris, Panagiotis. How to Make Lasting Encounters: Althusser and Political Subjectivity. *Rethinking Marxism* Vol. 26 No.3, 398-413, 2014. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2014.917845> (accessed 16 March 2016)

<sup>113</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, 171.

philosophy haunts for bourgeois language in philosophy into order to make explicit Marx's science.

Ideologies, according to Althusser, are what Dialectical Materialism eradicates in the mature works of Marx. For Althusser, the work of the young Marx is steeped in ideology as it is based on an anthropological, and thus a subjectivist critique of political economy. The 1844 writings are heavily influenced by Hegel and Feuerbach where Marx's main concern is the subject and its experiences of alienation. Therefore, the project of a Marxist science entails disengaging from concepts in the writings of the young Marx that deal with the "subject" as the human being or species being such as alienation, labor as a category of experience and as a form of activity undergone from a first-person perspective, as well as all references to consciousness. The symptomatic reading reveals that the change of *problématique* in the mature Marx is symptomatic of a shift in thinking, particularly disassociating from the pre-scientific, ideological framework steeped in subjectivistic methodology and idealist philosophical notions. As I have shown, the ultimate goal of the symptomatic reading is to demonstrate where ideology ends in Marx's work and where science begins.

Althusser's structuralist reading of Marx's works enticed a young generation of intellectuals in France, including the young Rancière who in 1964-1965 contributed to its affirmation by participating in the seminar organized by Althusser on reading Marx's *Capital* and where his contribution was included in the first publication of the seminar's text. For Rancière, the encounter with Althusser was a temporary detour from the road where he originally started, a road that he would traverse again after 1968. To fully grasp this shift in Rancière's thinking particularly in relation to the question of political subjectivity, first I will reconstruct the position he took in *Reading Capital* and then demonstrate how this stance changed after May 1968 followed by the

publication of his texts that directly attack Althusserian Marxism, including his early position in *Reading Capital*.

### The “Subject” in *Reading Capital* According to the Young Rancière

*Reading Capital*, together with other books of Althusser published in the 1960s, epitomized the symptomatic and structuralist reading of Marx. It proved to be very influential in defining the landscape of continental philosophy for the next decades. One of the students who contributed to the seminar was, of course, the 25-year-old Jacques Rancière who then specialized in the early writings of Marx, particularly its Feuerbachian anthropological interpretation. One could perhaps imagine the flattery but, at the same time, the pressure felt by the young Rancière when he was tasked by the most prominent philosopher in France at that time to contribute to the seminar on reading Marx’s *Capital*.<sup>114</sup> Specifically, Rancière was assigned to show the difference between the young Marx and the mature Marx via the text of *Capital*. This proved to be a challenging task for the former who knew the works of the young Marx but was totally unfamiliar with the text of *Capital*. In the *Method of Equality*, Rancière recalls the task he was given:

Althusser had said that Marx’s philosophy was there in practical form in *Capital*, but still needed to be identified and put into theory...My job was to demonstrate this ‘epistemological break.’ As a specialist in the young Marx, I was given the job of showing the difference between the young and the old.... Summing up the *Manuscripts of 1844* and showing why they weren’t scientific was relatively easy but showing how *Capital* changed everything was much more complicated.<sup>115</sup>

Despite this, Rancière stood up to the challenge of applying the symptomatic reading developed by Althusser to Marx’s text. To fulfill what was assigned to him, Rancière contributed a seminar text, which was later translated into two chapters for the publication of the seminar series

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<sup>114</sup> Re-reading Marx was seen by Althusser as the most important task, not just theoretically, but politically, for the time. For him, it was the only way to sort out the correct politics from the wrong one, by sorting out true science from ideology (on history) and true philosophy from bourgeois ideology (materialism versus idealism). This was exactly the same gesture as Lacan in relation to Freud, for the correct foundation of psychology and sciences of the culture. Althusser insists on the importance of “reading Marx” all the time.

<sup>115</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Method of Equality*, 9.

*Reading Capital*. These two chapters were titled “Critique of Political Economy in the 1844” “Manuscripts and Critique and Science in Capital.” Primarily, the goal of these chapters is to show the epistemological break in the works of Marx by focusing on the status of *critique* in both texts. At the end of his endeavor, Rancière comes to the conclusion that while the *Manuscripts of 1844* and *Capital* are both critiques of political economy, their logic is totally heterogeneous because of the change in the definition of “critique.”<sup>116</sup> Of course, this interpretation has major bearings on Rancière’s approach to subjectivity.

In the early Marx, critique is equated to an interpretation that operates through the idea of alienation. Alienation is the central critical category used by the young Marx in his early writings to refer to the experience of human beings in a capitalist society where they can no longer “find” or recognize themselves—the outputs of their production as the fruits of their labor are taken away from them, i.e. “alienated” from them, by the capitalist who owns their labor force. Labor is supposed to enable the realization of the complete human being. This goal is inverted with the advent of a capitalist society and becomes alienation. The fruit of man’s labor ceases to belong to him and is possessed and manipulated by the capitalist. Man therefore becomes disconnected from the products of his work as these “fruits” become independent objects, which are remote and often become more powerful than him. According to Marx, alienation happens in four levels: (1) man is alienated from himself as a result of (2) being alienated from the fruits of his labor, (3) from his own essence, from his “species being,” and lastly, (4) he also becomes alienated from his fellow workers. Thus, alienation is a direct attack against species life as the laborer in a capitalist system becomes poorer and miserable, and is forced to work; therefore, lacking the freedom to pursue other ends, he is reduced to a working machine—he is born, works his body until he can no longer bear to, and then eventually dies without being able to realize himself. Indeed, throughout his life the worker is also alienated from the truly “human” form of living.

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<sup>116</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Critique and Science in *Capital*,” in *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, 100.



The concept of alienation renders critique a subjective category with an anthropological basis. Given Althusser's thesis according to which idealism is the representative within philosophy of bourgeois class-positions in society, we can see how the young Rancière can precisely establish the link between this anthropological basis and the ideology character of the category in the early Marx. Here, the transformation of ideology into science that Althusser was driving at does not happen, because what takes place instead is a transformation internal to ideology.<sup>117</sup> As Rancière clarifies:

In the *Manuscripts* the equations which expressed the contradictions (e.g., the erection of the world of things into values = the depreciation of the world of men; or value of labour = value of means of subsistence) all referred to the equation: essence of man = essence foreign to man, i.e., they referred as their cause to the split between the human subject and its essence. The solution of the equation lay in one of its parts. The essence of man separated from the human subject provided the cause of the contradiction and the solution to the equation. The cause was referred to the act of subjectivity separating from itself.<sup>118</sup>

This definition of critique undergoes a shift in Marx's *Capital* according to Rancière, where critique becomes a particular aspect of the scientific enterprise and shifts away from ideology. Here, critique is focused on finding the laws of production and runs parallel to the scientific effort of finding general laws and conclusions that govern or operate in material reality, which is precisely what Althusser calls Marxist science. *Capital* in this Althusserian reading is scientific because the relationship between the commodities it describes—relationships of value—are grasped in the context of the overall economic system as functions of the social relations of production in a capitalist society.<sup>119</sup> *Capital* therefore goes beyond the anthropological reading of political economy that is focused on the subject by attempting to explicate the mechanisms and functions of the overarching structure. Instead of basing the theory of political economy on subjective concepts, Marx's approach in *Capital* begins with the abstract exposition of key

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 109.

economic concepts that define the field such as commodity, value, and labor. This suggests that such basic economic concepts are necessary for the formal understanding of the underlying mechanisms, which account, in turn, for the real basis of experiences of alienation and thereby provide the key for them to be understood.

As a result, according to the young Rancière, rather than being foundational for the analysis, those categories are instead shown to be produced by the system itself. The materialist explanation focused on the functioning of the system as a whole, demonstrates how the system requires subject-positions whose task is to take charge of the valorization process and thereby become the subject of the mechanisms of exploitation. Rancière describes that in the mature Marx, “the subject loses the substantial density which made it the constitutive principle of all objectivity of all substantiality, retaining only the meager reality of a bearer.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, subjectivity took on a functional position that is devoid of any human experience. There is nothing substantive or essential in this subject who only functions as a “bearer” of structuralist and functional capitalist relations.

This in turn means that from the subject’s point of view, these mechanisms may be present but can hardly be seen, at least not at the level of experience itself. They can be seen if the subject is enlightened by the theory over her own experience. Such mechanisms are not present to their consciousness or immediate social perception. As Rancière explains:

Thus the formal operations which characterize the space in which economic objects are related together manifest social processes while concealing them. We are no longer dealing with an anthropological causality referred to the act of subjectivity, but with a quite new causality which we can call metonymic causality,...Here we can state it as follows: what determines the connection between the effects, is the cause in so far as it is absent. The absent cause is not labour as a subject, it is the identity of abstract labour and concrete labour in as

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<sup>120</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Critique and Science in *Capital*,” in *Reading Capital*, 134.

much as its generalization expresses the structure of a certain mode of production, the capitalist mode of production.<sup>121</sup>

The epistemological break applied to Marx fundamentally affects the subject and the process of subjectivation. In the young Marx, subjective experience was a central element of the critique as it is against the subjective experience of the human being that the objective reality of capitalism is measured. In his 1965 study, Rancière argues that while in the *Manuscripts of 1844* the concepts of subjectivation, materialization, and reversal adequately express a certain conceptual content, in the theoretical field of *Capital*; they only *designate* a different conceptual content. In *Capital*, their register is no longer that of a conceptual adequation to their objects but rather that of *analogy*.<sup>122</sup>

This shift in the definition of critique has a significant methodological implication for Rancière, especially in terms of the notion of the subject. The mature Marx's move from psychology and anthropology to economic analysis and the science of history means that historical materialism in its mature version renders the subject-category epiphenomenal by showing how the subject is inherently "mystified." Since the goal of the Althusserian reading of Marx, which was followed through by Rancière, is to establish Marxist philosophy as a science by removing its ideological components, the subject, which is the bearer of ideology, becomes a central problem of the discussion. In particular, the subject becomes a major pole for mystification and ideological obfuscation. Subjectivity arose as a fundamental problem, but for all the wrong reasons.

For Althusser and the young Rancière, the fact that Marx shifts to a discussion of new objects, i.e., structural relations governing a given society at a particular moment in history, means that the break, which occurred in his thinking, involved the shift of focus from individual experiences of the subject into general laws of capitalist production. In this reading, Marx's mature work is scientific precisely because of his identification of a "concept-problem" (problematic) and

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 160.

the rigorous analysis of the causal system to which it belongs. The discussion of the mature Marx focuses on the structure of the relations of production in contrast to individual experiences of alienation. Here, Marx offers an explanation of *social relations* and the scientific process that cancel the amphibologies. Amphibology is the process that enables an economic law to become an anthropological law. Following Althusser's line of thinking, amphibologies are what made it possible for the early Marx to sound anthropological.<sup>123</sup>

Rancière defines the *process of production* as a scientific process that cancels the amphibologies by carrying out the de-subjectivation of economic categories. Rancière emphasizes this in the following terms:

On the one hand, the subject loses the substantial density which made it the constitutive principle of all objectivity, of all substantiality, retaining only the meager reality of a bearer. On the other hand, if, as we have shown, speculation and mystification, far from being the result of a transformation produced on the basis of *Wirklichkeit*, by a certain discourse, characterize the very mode in which the structure of the process presents itself in *Wirklichkeit*, the essential content of the subject function will consist of 'being-mystified'..<sup>124</sup>

Thus, the notion of subjectivity in the mature Marx undergoes a double negation. First, it loses its original place as the center of the critique since the focus shifts away from alienation. A second, more radical negation is that subjectivity is mystified; it is rendered incapable of knowledge even of its own circumstance. The subject in the mature Marx is reduced to a mere pawn in the structure of a capitalist production where none of its experiences is given any methodological or critical weight. Rancière explains in the following passage:

The agent of production is thus defined as a personification or bearer of the relations of production. He intervenes here not as a constitutive subject but as a perceiving subject trying to *explain to itself* the economic relations that it perceives. The verb *erklären*, which was the young Marx's expression for the critical activity, here designates the necessarily mystified manner in which the

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<sup>123</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Critique of Political Economy in the 1844 Manuscripts," in *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, 86.

<sup>124</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Critique and Science in *Capital*," in *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, 134.

capitalist subject tries to understand the structure in which it is caught (*befangen*).<sup>125</sup>

Rancière, thinking along the lines of his mentor, thus affirms the mystification of the subject through its entanglement in the valorization process, in the mature works of Marx. The subject is mystified in different levels. There is mystification at the level of experience where experiences are considered as filled with ideology and the subject is caught up in social reality that makes up experience. Experience in itself is mystified and cannot be trusted because the subject is not capable of understanding her own experience as she is subjected to false beliefs. In relation to experience, subjects are also mystified. Subjects do not understand how they stand within society because they have an imaginary relationship to society and to themselves. Thirdly, mystification also happens at the level of discourse because the words used by the subject to express her thoughts about her experiences are misled by her false understanding and are therefore constitutively wrong or misguided.

Discourse is central in the discussion here because it is by looking at the words of the workers that Rancière will disprove this idea of mystification and reverse his early position that is in line with Althusserian Marxism. He will extract from the words of the workers the different layers of experience as proof that the workers are neither mystified nor misguided. This will become crucial in the later part of my thesis where I will study how in his latest works, Rancière returns to the different levels at stake between discourse and experience when he talks about embodied subjects, speaking subjects, feeling subjects. Thus, arguing that it is impossible to talk about people's experiences by merely conducting interviews and surveys on the premise that they are confused and incapable of understanding themselves (similar to the method of sociology).

It would take a few years and the events of May 1968 before Rancière is able to reverse his early position on the subject of social experience, and claim that the disregard for the subject and the negation of its capacity for knowledge, knowledge in general and knowledge of her own

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 135.

experience, is problematic for a practice of emancipation. The section that follows is a discussion of Rancière's break with Althusser and the former's move to correct himself and revert to his original reading of Marx after the events of May 1968.

## **The Break with Althusser**

### **1968**

A discussion on Rancière's transition to his current theoretical position is incomplete without considering the events of 1968 in France. For several years, scholars have been in dispute about what exactly happened in France in May 1968 and why was it such an important part of French history.<sup>126</sup> Succinctly put, May 1968 was the rupture point of several historical events around the world, with some of its most lasting impacts felt in France. Deranty describes 1968 as "a year of revolutionary effervescence...prepared by mounting political antagonisms and social, cultural dissatisfaction, particularly among the youth, in the two decades following the end of the war."<sup>127</sup> No one was able to predict the enormity of the protests of students and workers hand-in-hand that led to the closing of universities and factories. For a brief moment, life in France seemed to have stopped as the dissatisfaction of the people were brought to the streets. Kristin Ross in the book *May 68 and Its Afterlives* attributed the strength of the protest to "a synchronicity or 'meeting' between the intellectual refusal of the reigning ideology and worker insurrection."<sup>128</sup>

Rancière was one of the young scholars who witnessed the unfolding of the events in 1968. He, however, was neither a part of any student protests nor someone who built any barricades in the streets of Paris. Illness forced him to watch the revolt from a distance and engage only in the

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<sup>126</sup> Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>127</sup> Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Introduction: A Journey in Equality" in *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts* (UK:Acument, 2010), 2.

<sup>128</sup> Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its After lives*, 4.

aftermath of the protests when the universities were reopened.<sup>129</sup> From 1969 to 1972, Rancière was a militant activist, and he would often be in dialogue with militant workers and labor-union leaders in meetings held inside and outside the factories. Witnessing this development made him hope that perhaps the uprisings would actually lead to positive changes.

Another concrete outcome of the 1968 revolt was the opening of the experimental University of Paris VIII-Vincennes where the philosophy department was headed by Michel Foucault. The university was built in response to the students' demand for more academic freedom, that is, freedom from state repression, and better conditions for the working class. True to the spirit of May 1968, Vincennes housed the most radical department of philosophy in France and numerous leftist scholars. It was here that Rancière yet again witnessed the classical debate of the hierarchy of theory and practice in the academe, as there were many thinkers who used the Althusserian reading of Marx to justify the authority of the intellectuals over the masses. From the perspective of growing critical awareness developed by the young intellectual, the University of Paris VIII, which was built in response to the demands of 1968, seemed bound to dissolve the movement's potential into academic and cultural novelties. It was not long after 1968 that the intellectuals were once again thinking of themselves as the shepherd of the masses. Rancière claimed that it was during the early stages of Vincennes that he realized it was time to abandon Althusserianism:

All of a sudden, I told myself that that was beyond pale. I'd been behind in relation to the event, but the more time passed, the more I believed in 68. It's from that point that I started developing the thinking that leads to the 1969 essay on the theory of ideology and then to *Althusser's Lesson*. I'd begun to react in a way that was the complete opposite of what I'd been part of till then, the struggle of science against ideology, the theory of a rupture. It's based on this initial confrontation that I really

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<sup>129</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Method of Equality*, 15.

started to question Althusserianism, the famous essay on student problems and the whole trajectory we'd been on before that.<sup>130</sup>

From then on, Rancière worked on the premise that Althusserianism was a dogmatic theory that refuses to recognize the reality of class struggle as it came to prominence in the revolutionary events of 1968. Althusser remained staunch in his structuralist reading of Marx, which is focused on the rupture of science and ideology. In addition to this unflinching theoreticism, Althusserianism was also appropriated by the academics who were attempting to rebuild the French society on the premise of the logic of reason. The intellectuals were once again doing philosophy from their ivory towers, setting aside the lessons from the protests in the streets. As a response to this, Rancière started criticizing Althusser. In fact, the lecture on Marx's *German Ideology*, which was among the early lectures Rancière gave at Vincennes (although intended to be a commentary on Marx's text on ideology), turned out to be a critique of Althusser's own critique of ideology and provided the preliminary material for his 1969 article "On the Theory of Ideology."

May 1968 was a pivotal point for several intellectuals in France. In philosophy, the limelight was once again focused on the debate about the gap between theory and practice, the validity of a struggle incited by all classes, the question on who are the subjects of political action, and the normative implications of a theory that is hinged upon the presupposition of the inequality of intelligence. These are the very questions addressed in the early works of Rancière. Before directly proceeding to a discussion of Rancière's early works, I will first outline the key conceptual aspects of Rancière's primary preoccupation with the relationship between theory and practice.

### ***Rancière's Problematique: Theory and Practice***

A distinctive character of Rancière's work is his dedication to the study of the implications of a political theory based on a presupposition of the inequality of intelligence. More specifically,

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 17.



he is concerned with the ways in which domination can be maintained by theoretical positions, notably those that allegedly aim to denounce and overturn domination.<sup>131</sup> Succinctly put, this pertains to the question of whether “subversive thoughts are recuperated for the service of order.”<sup>132</sup> As a philosopher, Rancière’s work deals with unmasking concepts and conceptual schemes that are in the service of domination. Interestingly, despite his criticisms of Althusser, Rancière has been influenced by Althusser’s view of what philosophy is supposed to do, that is, to debunk the ideology behind the façade of a theory. The difference, however, between the two thinkers is apparent in terms of their assumptions and goals. While Althusser aims to establish philosophy as a Science of theories, Rancière remains suspicious of the divisive hierarchy of intelligence on which philosophy stands.

Having engaged with the works of Althusser and witnessing the events in 1968 and later on seeing how Althusserianism was used to justify a revisionist position during and after May 1968, Rancière saw how a philosophy confronted by the social reality of class struggle remained oblivious to the call for political change. Althusser’s position that the students of May 1968 were wrong to revolt and that they were manipulated by a social-democratic conspiracy<sup>133</sup> was supported by numerous intellectuals of the far left (i.e., university professors, academics, the PCF) as part of the great debate that ensued after the events in 1968. Althusserianism played a significant role for those who wanted to ignore the potential of the revolt as it was used for the purpose of policing the effects of 1968. As Rancière puts it in “On the Theory of Ideology”:

Althusserian theoretical presuppositions prevent us from understanding the political meaning of the student revolt. But further within a year we saw

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<sup>131</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson*, translated by Emiliano Battista (London/New York: Continuum, 2011), XVI.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 53.

Althusserianism serving the hacks of revisionism in a theoretical justification for the ‘anti-leftist’ offensive and the defense of academic knowledge.<sup>134</sup>

This triggered Rancière to question the philosophical reading of Marx that he had originally appropriated. More fundamentally, it also became the springboard for his work of searching for the implications of a standard method of thinking the relationship between political theory and political practice, and the relationship between theorists and the subjects involved in politics than tends towards policing thought. What is the correct method for thinking politics if one wants to avoid postulating a gap between theory and practice? Who are those involved in politics? What are the implications for political realities of a theory that is premised upon inequality? What would a political theory look like if it were based on the opposite assumption of equality between those who act and those who are supposed to “know”?

Rancière has had a long journey with these questions, but he remains consistent about his goal, that is, to reveal the roots of domination in political theories and find a way to deal with the implications of these theories by showing how theory can unfold in such a way that it does not reproduce domination. Most importantly, he addressed these questions with the presupposition of the equality of intelligence. In the late 60s and early 70s, Rancière wrote three major texts that challenged the position of Althusserian Marxism, including his own work in *Reading Capital*. These texts became the seeds of his mature thoughts. It is interesting to note that in his turn away from Althusser’s reading of Marx, he would once again return to the anthropological early Marx and defend the position that it is the concrete experiences of the subject that create class struggle. The reality of the class struggle is given back to the subjects who are the flesh and soul of political struggle.

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<sup>134</sup> Jacques Rancière, “On the Theory of Ideology” in *Althusser’s Lesson*, 129.

## Challenging Althusserian Marxism

### “On the Theory of Ideology” (1974)

Witnessing his mentor taking a revisionist position<sup>135</sup> and favoring theory over practice despite everything that took place in 1968 made Rancière question his own affiliation to Althusserianism.<sup>136</sup> In 1969, he wrote an article that was supposed to be for inclusion in an Althusser anthology. This article was published in Argentina but only made its appearance in France in 1973. Rancière first thought it was unnecessary to publish the article in France in 1968 because he believed that May 1968 had already taught more than what theory could teach. In the 1973 afterword of the French translation of the essay in discussion, Rancière explains why it took four years for the essay’s publication in France:

...:for those who witnessed and took part in May 1968, the practical demonstrations of the mass movement seemed to be proof enough that the question of Althusserianism could be considered historically settled...this kind of theoretical refutation seemed laughable compared with the lessons of the struggle when at every stop, the autonomous initiative of the masses was finding itself policed by revisionism; it would have seemed anachronistic to settle accounts with a theoretical police whose headquarters May has sent up in flames.<sup>137</sup>

Rancière understood May 1968 as a critical event that would cast doubt on the status of the theoretical by the reality of a mass ideological revolt. When the opposite of this expectation happened and several leftist intellectuals in France took the position of Althusser’s theoreticism, Rancière published the essay “On the Theory of Ideology” as a preliminary criticism of Althusser. This was eventually followed by a lengthy and detailed work addressing various facets of Althusser’s work published as a book titled *Althusser’s Lesson*. The focus of my analysis will be

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<sup>135</sup> Revisionism is the move to mitigate the historical impact of May 1968. Althusserian ideology has evolved to become the very apparatus of bourgeois domination that it was supposed to criticize. In other words, in Althusser’s discourse, metaphysics orchestrates the promotion of revisionist ideology to the rank of Marxist theory.

<sup>136</sup> Jacques Rancière, “On the Theory of Ideology” in *Althusser’s Lesson*, 139.

<sup>137</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Afterword from the French Edition of On the Theory of Ideology,” *Radical Philosophy* (February 1973), 10 in < [https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/wp-content/files\\_mf/rp7\\_article1\\_althusserstheoryofideology\\_ranci%C3%A8re.pdf](https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/wp-content/files_mf/rp7_article1_althusserstheoryofideology_ranci%C3%A8re.pdf)> accessed September 2016.

on the common arguments of these two early works against the theoreticism of Althusser and how this critique of Althusser led Rancière to his own theory of politics and the subject of politics

In “On the Theory of Ideology”, Rancière’s primary task was that of exposing the link between the Althusserian reading of Marx and the political revisionism that threatened to erase the lessons of 1968. The central argument of the essay is that Althusser’s theory of Ideology is the exact point where Althusser insists on Marxist science. Althusser’s theory of Ideology, which delineates between ideology and science and establishes science as the only legitimate source of true knowledge, creates (1) a hierarchy in knowledge (i.e., real-life perceptions and facts are ideology, while abstract, objective generalities are science), which trickles down to (2) a hierarchy of people between those who do not know (i.e., the unenlightened masses mystified by ideology) and those who know (i.e., the Marxist intellectual and the Communist Party). Rancière staunchly argues that such hierarchy is nothing short of the metaphysics that has instilled order in society by way of division.

Suspicious of Althusser’s theory of Ideology, Rancière writes: “Ideology, in fact, is not simply a collection of discourses or a system of representations.” Rather, it “is a *power* organized in a collection of institutions (the system of knowledge, information, etc.)”<sup>138</sup> Althusser’s elitism does not contest but in fact reaffirms the existing system of knowledge which produces real ideology. Furthermore, Rancière accuses Althusser of missing the point because the latter was thinking in the classical metaphysical terms of the theory of the imaginary (understood as the system of representations that separate the subject from the truth.) As if adding insult to the injury inflicted upon the subject, the intellectuals thinking along the lines of Althusser took the position of Marxist scholars who were acting in line with the interest of the PCF.<sup>139</sup> This means treating the students’ revolt as an event that was purely driven by ideology of either misled or blind

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<sup>138</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson*, 142

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

participants incapable of knowing that they have already been tricked by the dominant ideology.

As Rancière argues:

What Althusser does is counter bourgeois academic discourse with Marxist academic discourse; concretely, that means countering the 'spontaneous' and 'petit-bourgeois- ideology of the students with the scientific rigour of Marxism as embodied in the wisdom of the central committee.<sup>140</sup>

The appropriation therefore of Althusserian ideology by the intellectual class negates the very logic at the heart of the 1968 revolt because it subsumes the class struggle under the abstract division of science and ideology. This struggle of science against ideology benefits bourgeois ideology, for it strengthens two of its crucial bastions: the system of knowledge and the revisionist ideology.<sup>141</sup>

For Althusser, ideology is false, yet it is indispensable to the social structure.<sup>142</sup> It is pitted against science, where science is viewed as that which is capable of shedding light upon the veil of illusion of ideology. Rancière identifies a problem with these theses and the way in which the critical theory of knowledge consolidates the theory of social experience to disconnect them in both cases from class struggle. In "On the Theory of Ideology", Rancière writes:

The ideology/science opposition presupposes the re-establishment of a space homologous to the space the metaphysical tradition as a whole conceives so as to be able to pit science against its other and thus posit the closure of a discursive universe that it split into the realms of true and false, into the world of science and its other (opinion, error, illusion, etc.). When ideology is no longer thought as being, fundamentally, the site of struggle – a class struggle -- it falls into the spot determined by the history of metaphysics: that of the Other of Science.<sup>143</sup>

Rather than becoming an instrument of emancipation, Althusserian Marxism has contributed to the very logic of domination by insisting on the lack of the knowledge of the

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<sup>140</sup> Jacques Rancière, "On the Theory of Ideology" in *Althusser's Lesson*, 142.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> The complete quote states, "... every social structure is necessarily opaque to its agents. Ideology is not only present in every social totality-because the totality is determined by its structure – it is also invested with a general function, namely to provide the system of representations that allow agents of the social totality to carry out the tasks determined by the structure." See Ibid., 130.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.,136.

political subject. Althusser's position ignores the concrete reality of the mass revolt at the level of experience and disregards its impact on theory at the level of "science." It confines the discourse of the class struggle to theory and takes it away from the actions of the actual historical actors, the subjects in revolt. Althusserian Marxism becomes a critique of the very object it is supposed to justify and support when it tried to discredit the revolts of 1968. This version of Marxism becomes a critique of class struggle which in theory it is supposed to justify and support. In a struggle for emancipation where the bourgeois intellectuals are supposed to be fighting alongside the proletarians, Althusser's version of Marxism ends up doing the opposite precisely because of his elitist bourgeois stance on knowledge which aims to establish a metaphysics of distinction between what is true and false. For the young Rancière, when this is the case, Althusser actually veers away from Marxism whose soul has always been "the concrete analysis of a concrete situation"<sup>144</sup> and falls into the very trap of metaphysics that is blind to the real site of the class struggle. As Rancière explains:

It is clear, though, that the science/ ideology opposition is unsuited to such an analysis. Consequently, in lieu of a concrete analysis, what we find is the lonely repetition of a classical division of metaphysics, brought in to trace an imaginary class division that serves no other purpose than to make it possible to turn a blind eye to the real sites of class struggle.<sup>145</sup>

Turning a blind eye to the site of the class struggle is tantamount to turning a blind eye to the participants of the class struggle. Althusser invalidates the lessons of May 1968 and covers over his theoretical disempowering of subjects in revolt by arguing that rather than man, it is the masses who make history. When he adds the element of an enlightened exploited class capable of uniting the masses, this is no solution to the disempowerment that has been effectuated. When he declares that "Man is a mystery and it is the masses who make history,"<sup>146</sup> this sounds like a sophisticated philosophical thesis, but in fact, so the young Rancière argues, it is a way of robbing

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Althusser, "Reply to John Lewis," *On Ideology*, 77.

those very “masses,” precisely through this very naming, of any real agency, and places it instead in the enlightened intellectuals who can see through ideology at all levels.<sup>147</sup> Over and against these anonymous and, in the end, powerless “masses,” the subject for Althusser is essentially mystified, both from a first-person perspective, in relation to her own experience, and from a third-person point of view, as a structuralist analysis can show. This subject is incapable of any knowledge with regard to its circumstance in the process of production. The subject is an ideological construct at all levels of analysis i.e., experientially, in terms of social analysis, and in philosophical terms.

Rancière thus rejects this Althusserian reading as deeply problematic because the subjects are deprived of their agency and are rendered incapable of thinking for themselves, recognizing their own oppression, and governing themselves. The science/ideology divide according to Rancière subsumes a concrete Marxist analysis of class struggle into abstract categories that are pitted against each other. The supposedly historical critique of society is brought back to a metaphysics of categories of analysis that could support a revisionist reading of May 1968. Furthermore, this reading leads to a second more problematic consequence; that is, the science/ideology legitimizes the divide between the unthinking masses and the intellectual class.

Althusser comes from a long tradition of Marxist philosophers who have argued that philosophy is class struggle in theory. There is a special recognition for the place of intellectual capacity in this tradition where philosophy is viewed as a theoretical revolutionary method for social transformation. Rancière, however, identifies the way in which Althusser’s incorporation of science into Marxist philosophy creates a hierarchical divide between the subjects of politics. The ‘intellectual class’ establishes itself as an authority over the masses who are rendered as blinded by ideology and remain in a subjective, that is, a mystified position. The second thesis of Althusser on pedagogic function reproduces the traditional position of philosophy in relation to knowledge.

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<sup>147</sup> “In a class society they are the exploited masses, that is, the exploited social classes, social strata and social categories, grouped around the exploited class capable of uniting them in a movement against the dominant classes which hold state power.” Ibid., 78.

“Althusser hides this position by defining philosophy as the domain of theory which represents scientificity in politics, with the classes engaged in the class struggle.”<sup>148</sup> Althusser thus reinvents a technical division of labor within knowledge production to designate the specific task of thinking to a particular intellectual class. Because of all this, class struggle itself becomes ideological. It remains as an expression of mystification, unless guided by the intellectual. This resulted in another dimension of theory that works in the service of domination rather than the stated goal of emancipation.

In his 1964 essay “Student Problems,” Althusser explicitly argued about the hierarchy of knowledge. He writes about the goal of the University, that is, “to provide the pedagogic training formation of future technical, scientific and social cadres of the society and of participating in creative scientific work.”<sup>149</sup> Althusser insists on the privileged position of the University based on having values, which are a product of scientific work.<sup>150</sup> Once again, science is set at the highest level of the ladder of knowledge with the University as its physical vessel of pedagogy. The University has been put in-charge of transmitting knowledge to the non-knowers because they are the possessors of unequal-superior knowledge.<sup>151</sup> Given the technical division of labor with the University at the top of the hierarchy, Althusser stated that equality when it comes to knowledge is impossible.<sup>152</sup> Most importantly, even the revolution should follow this hierarchy of knowledge.

As Althusser puts it:

It is no accident that a reactionary bourgeois or ‘technocratic’ government prefers half-knowledge in all things, and that, on the contrary, the revolutionary cause is always indissolubly linked with knowledge, in other words science. It is much easier to manipulate intellectuals with a weak scientific training than intellectuals

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<sup>148</sup> Rancière, “On the Theory of Ideology” in *Althusser’s Lesson*, 144.

<sup>149</sup> Louis Althusser “Student Problems” *Radical Philosophy* 170 (November/December 2011): 11 <[https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/wpcontent/files\\_mf/rp170\\_article1\\_althusser\\_studentsproblemsmonta\\_gintro.pdf](https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/wpcontent/files_mf/rp170_article1_althusser_studentsproblemsmonta_gintro.pdf)> (accessed September 2015).

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>152</sup> The collective forms of work that exist in the practice of scientific research presuppose precisely, the equality of knowledge between researchers that render their exchanges and collaboration fruitful. But research does not just presuppose an equality of intelligence, but an equality in the knowledge that it is indispensable.



with a strong one, to manipulate them and submit them to a policy which, whatever certain people say, is being implemented with considerable skill. What the government fears above all is the scientific and critical training of the intellectuals it is nonetheless obliged to train, in order to provide itself with cadres and teachers.<sup>153</sup>

By insisting on a hierarchy of knowledge based on his science/ideology divide, Althusser consequently discredits any revolution that does not have the blessing of either the *party* or an intellectual. This, for Rancière, is highly problematic inasmuch as all actions done by a political agent are measured against the standard of one who is deemed as a possessor of superior knowledge. In this sense, no authentic political movement could possibly arise out of individuals who are misguided, deluded, and moved by ideology and not by science.

In response to this Althusserian problem, Rancière has attempted to find an alternative that would not relegate the subjects of politics into a cave of ignorance. He begins to ask the question on political subjectivity and tries to retrieve the voice of the concrete subjects who were involved in class struggles to take the opposite direction of the Althusserian argument. Starting with the exact premise that philosophy is class struggle in theory, Rancière digs into the archive of workers' journals and memoirs to find the words, the weapons they employed in their class struggle. By reviving and recalling the words of the concrete subjects, he allows them to speak for themselves, thereby showing that they have the capacity for thinking, speaking and acting—a capacity that is not exclusive to a particular class— and that emancipation first becomes possible through the recognition of one's capacity to think and speak.

### **“How to use Lire le Capital”<sup>154</sup> (1973)**

In addition to the essay “On the Theory of Ideology” and the book *Althusser's Lesson*, another work of Rancière that is decisive to understanding his early interest in notions of political

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<sup>153</sup> Louis Althusser, *Student Problems*, 15.

<sup>154</sup> The original title of the book is *Reading Capital* in French. Jacques Rancière, “How to use Lire le Capital,” *Economy and Society* 5, no. 3 (1976): 377 DOI: 10.1080/03085147600000017.

subjectivity is the short essay “How to use *Lire le Capital*.” This text was originally written as a revised preface to the second edition of *Reading Capital*. In the end, however, it was not included for publication because the editors decided to retain only the texts of Althusser and Balibar. Rancière revised many of his original position in the 1965 seminar on *Capital* resulting in the article not being in accord with Althusser’s structuralist reading of Marx. Rancière sent the article to *Le Temps Modernes* where it was published in November 1973.<sup>155</sup>

This essay is important as it explicitly shows how Rancière criticized and corrected himself with regard to several of his early ideas as an Althusserian participating in a seminar on reading Marx’s *Capital* in 1965. The work serves to distance himself from a former structuralist reading of Marx and explains his move to a reading of Marx that focuses its lens on the words of 19<sup>th</sup> century workers describing their everyday struggles, dreams of a different life, and hope for conditions different from what they had. The text, on several instances, employs irony and a harsh tone of self-criticism that condemns Rancière’s earlier position of adherence to Althusser’s scientific Marxism. Compared with “On the Theory of Ideology”, this is a short but straightforward essay that identifies specific locations of Rancière’s dissent from his intellectual master Althusser and from his own stand in *Reading Capital*.

In “How to use *Lire le Capital*,” Rancière calls Althusser’s symptomatic reading of Marx a *distortion* of Marxism for the purpose of guaranteeing the scientific problematic of Althusserianism.<sup>156</sup> The use of the word ‘distortion’ emphasizes the strength of Rancière’s critique of his intellectual master’s method as a manipulation of Marx’s texts to serve the agenda of establishing Marxist science. For Rancière, the symptomatic reading of Althusser, which is in fact an implicit reading of a text, has deliberately suppressed a strategic dimension of the texts of

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<sup>155</sup> For a more detailed bibliographical note on the circumstances surrounding this essay, refer to Jeffrey Mehlman’s review article. Teaching Reading: The Case of Marxism in France, *Diacritics* vol. 6 no. 4 (Winter, 1976) 10-18 The John Hopkins University Press, <https://www.jstor.org/464688> (Accessed 13/11/16)

<sup>156</sup> Rancière, “How to use *Lire le Capital*”, 377

Marx.<sup>157</sup> In particular, Rancière emphasizes Althusser's disregard for the speech function<sup>158</sup> that could be found within *Capital*. By speech function, Rancière pertains to the thoughts of the workers that were evident in their accounts of their experience. Rancière argues that such speech functions should have been treated as a starting point from which a critical discourse may be questioned, for these speech functions demonstrate the class struggle concretely. The relations between the classes could be ascertained through the analysis of statements of those who are involved in the struggle against capitalism. As Rancière maintains:

Thus there are the effects on the discourse of the *1844 Manuscripts* or of *Capital* of discursive forms (reports by police commissioners or public attorneys, inquiries by doctors and economists, sermons, electoral speeches, etc.) in which the bourgeoisie thinks (i.e. thinks-in-order-to-repress) the proletariat. But there is also the resonance in their text of discursive forms in which the proletariat thinks itself --to suppress: from voices in the workshop, rumours in the streets, market-places and labour exchanges, to the leading ideas of working-class insurrection, by way of the educated forms of working-class literature or the popular forms of street songs. Traces of discourse from above or echoes of voices from below indicate the starting-point from which a critical discourse may be questioned: where the aims of speech are the aims of power.<sup>159</sup>

Such suppression of speech functions is for instance, revealed in the Althusserian treatment of the *1844 Manuscripts* and *Capital* where instead of recognizing the speech of the workers as a material for critical discourse, he focused on "a mode of reading enclosed within the relation of a discourse to its object."<sup>160</sup> Instead of taking his cue from the speech of the workers, Althusser insisted on an implicit criticism of Marx. Rancière thus argues that what entails from this theoretical practice is a negative treatment of a text through a denial of what is stated. In this case, "the exterior never intrudes in its positive form, but always appears in the form of a deficiency."<sup>161</sup> Furthermore, while Althusser's implicit reading places science away from the ideological

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

perceptions and statements of the proletarians, the proletarians are, at the same time, kept blind of their own state of oppression; they are rendered as mystified subjects in need of a theory that would explain to them their own experiences. Rancière admits that when he participated in *Reading Capital*, he was in full affirmation of the Althusserian reading of Marx. In fact, he has shown his agreement through his analysis of fetishism<sup>162</sup>—“an analysis that reduces the bourgeois and workers of the same status as *agents of production*, inevitably mystified by their very practice as agents. (The proposition, in short, that the false ideas come from social practice!)”<sup>163</sup>

As I have shown, this is a position that Rancière eventually abandoned. To assert the weight of his turn away from Althusser, “How to use *Lire le Capital*” dedicates a portion to the discussion of fetishism as a key concept Rancière used in *Reading Capital* to prove the epistemological break between the early Marx and the mature Marx of *Capital*, and how he now abandons such a faulty reading of Marx. In Rancière’s new reading, the epistemological break that Althusser posits in his reading of Marx is, in fact, not real. He asserts that “the ‘ideological’ discourse of the Manuscripts and the ‘scientific’ discourse of *Capital* reflect the same theoretical principle: the principle which posits that the constitution of an object and the constitution of its illusion are one and the same process.”<sup>164</sup>

The break between Althusser and Rancière is what I have been examining in the previous discussions within this chapter (when I discuss the shifts in Rancière’s work from his early works up until *Althusser’s Lesson*.) However, it is in his self-admission in “How to Use *Lire le Capital*” that Rancière stated how he has completely shifted away from his previous position: first, by recognizing the importance of speech function as a starting point of looking at the class struggle as a play of power between the proletariat and the bourgeois; and second, by showing through the concept of fetishism the problem with Althusser’s insistence on theoreticism and regard for class

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<sup>162</sup> “The effects of misunderstanding produced by this ‘symptomatic’ reading appear clearly in my analysis of fetishism. Ibid., 378-379.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 379.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

struggle as an abstract event that could only be explained by way of theory. This is a development in Rancière's work that I will study in the next two chapters, Chapter 3 on *Logical Revolts* and Chapter 4 on *Proletarian Nights* wherein I will discuss the different aspects of proletarian speech functions and experience.

Both moves that comprise the self-criticism of Rancière through the reversal of his position on fetishism have an important implication for political subjectivity in his own work. Such moves overturn the idea about the mystification of the subjects of capitalism and the necessity for theorists to guide the subjects towards demystification. Here, Rancière acknowledges the capacity of the subjects to think as he investigates the words that they themselves have written—words that narrate their thoughts, desires, dreams, and feelings. Rancière posits that we have to examine speech functions as discourses of power that demonstrate the struggle between those who are oppressed and those who oppress because these speech functions display the oppression that concretely happens based on the point of view of the subjects involved.

Contrary to his previous position in *Reading Capital* that fetishism functions as a mask hiding the relations of production and that subjects are incapable of identifying their exploitation,<sup>165</sup> here, Rancière contends that fetishism is not far removed from the experience of the subjects in a manner that Althusser is suggesting when he argues that fetishism is a concept that best explains the structural, functionalist relations of subjects and objects in the capitalist system. Against Althusserian Marxism, Rancière argues that fetishism is in fact steeped with ideology inasmuch as the subjects first experience it when they relate to each other. And it is precisely this concept, which Althusser calls ideology that informs the science of Marx. Rancière, employing irony in his expression explains below:

But in any case, fetishism is *not at all* a theory of ideology (such a theory is an object not of Marx's discourse but of a reading of Marx) but the theoretical representative of a leading idea in which are concentrated the dreams of

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<sup>165</sup> "Fetishism thus represents not an anthropological process but the specific dislocation according to which the structure of the capitalists mode of production presents itself in the field of Wirklichkeit of Alltageben (everyday life) and offers itself to the consciousness and criticism of the agents of production, the bearer of capitalist relations of production." Jacques Rancière, "Critique and Science in *Capital*", in *Reading Capital Complete Edition*, 167.

fighting proletarians: the association of free producers, a proletarian dream put to the test a thousand times since the autumn of 1833 when the striking tailors of Paris tried to be their own masters... Fetishism represents *in theory*, i.e. in terms of the *conditions of understanding* (and of misunderstanding), that other world borne by the proletarian struggle, which makes its object thinkable.<sup>166</sup>

Such is tantamount to saying that Althusser's scientific Marxism, in fact, owes itself to what Althusser himself labels as ideology. The very things that make a theory possible are the experiences and the perceptions of everyday people, i.e., the workers. Rancière completely turns Althusserianism around arguing that it is only from the point of view of the proletarian struggle that fetishism can be understood. In fact, the proletarians are not mystified and have a complete understanding of their own situation because in the first place, it is through their perceptions and experiences that a theory of fetishism becomes possible. In other words, it is when one starts looking at capitalist society from the point of view of those who are exploited and rebel against it that one can finally see all the mystification. In reference to the workers' struggle for emancipation, Rancière further explicates:

This was certainly ideology-dreams of freely associating producers, of the abolition of money, of simple workers seizing the administrative machine, of cooks directing state affairs. It had to be so: the impurity of science is due not only to the 'survivals' of older philosophies but to its very principle. The idea of revolution is fairly ideological. And surely if the commodity, which illustrates the phantasmagorias of value, proves to be clothing, then the working tailors (strikers of Paris, militants of the League of the Just, the fraternal tailors of Clichy) have something to do with it—as have also those Lyons silk workers who wove finery for the rich together with the winding sheets of the old world.<sup>167</sup>

Here, Rancière states that, in contrast to the old position he held in *Reading Capital*, fetishism is not a science far removed from the agents of production by virtue of their blindness to the whole process. The relationship that exists between the agents and the objects is not characterized by mystification but by a link, which can be drawn from the fact that it is the agent of production who has a first-hand encounter with the objects or the commodity. And so here,

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<sup>166</sup> Jacques Rancière, "How to use Lire le Capital", 382.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

ideology becomes a positive term in the sense that it (ideology) is the discourses that those actors themselves develop to try and make sense of their reality. From this encounter springs the dream of the worker that fuels his struggle for emancipation. Fetishism as a concept, in fact, “indicates a historical rupture in a dual movement: on the one hand, the movement from the representation to the science of its location, from the perception of production agents (i.e. proletarians) to the science of their blindness; on the other hand, the movement which related this science to an image of the future borne by the workers’ struggle.”<sup>168</sup> Fetishism is not a science that can only be uncovered by the thinker; it is what defines the relation of the worker to the product of his labor as well as to the whole process of production, which becomes the material that would move him to dream of an alternate reality.

Transitioning to the philosophical stance that he would take in the next years of his philosophical career, Rancière states the old position that he abandons at the end of the text of “How to use *Lire le Capital*” calling it as, “more than a self-justification of a work of commentary clothed with the prestige of ‘Science’.” In fact, he criticizes this position as “relating profoundly to paranoid representations of power:”

My reading stood on this little stage in which the criticism of ‘humanism’ or of ‘the idealist theory of the subject’ (poor scarecrows for theoretical sparrows) was concerned entirely with the scientistic portrayal of fetishism-i.e. with the representation of a world of agents enclosed within illusion by which alone they participated in the mechanism of capitalist production. It is not enough to say about this representation that it was **the self-justification of a work of commentary clothed with the prestige of ‘Science’**. Because it does not only relate to the repressive attitude of ‘science’ towards the inevitably ‘ideological’ voices of rebels and the oppressed, but relates, more profoundly still, to the **paranoid representations of power. That the spontaneous perception and speech of the agents of production must be the result of a machination of production relations** (i.e. absent in reality) **expresses, in discursive forms appropriate to philosophy, the paranoid setting of power-and in particular of ‘proletarian’ (revisionist) power-according to which every spontaneous expression by these agents is the result of machination from outside.**<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 382-383.

<sup>169</sup> Jacques Rancière, “How to use *Lire le Capital*,” (emphasis mine) 383.

A scientific reading of Marx like that of Althusser's can be twisted to become an instrument of domination, specifically when the subject is treated as if incapable of thinking for herself. For Rancière, the Althusserian move to take the subject as mystified reveals Althusser's refusal to recognize the subject as a seat of political agency. This is the very position that would propel Rancière to the direction of the archival work that he did on the writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century workers in France to prove his old Althusserian position wrong.

### **Althusser's Lesson**

In 1974, Rancière extended his critique of Althusserianism into a book published as his first major work titled *La Leçon d'Althusser*, translated into English as *Althusser's Lesson* (2011). The book, composed of five chapters, contains a detailed theoretical analysis of Althusserian Marxism as well as a description of the historical context that allowed it to flourish. Rancière's manner of criticism, ranging from ironic remarks to some ad hominem critique, formally signaled the break between the teacher Althusser and one of his brilliant students who, some six years earlier, contributed to the seminar on *Reading Capital*.<sup>170</sup>

The publication of the book had lasting effects on Rancière's career. It solidified the issues he had with regard to the relationship between intellectual and critical thought. It exposed some of the major themes he would be working on in the next 50 years of his life such as the equality of intelligence, political disagreement, and the distribution of the sensible, which he would trace in the tradition of Marxist struggle. Essentially, it prompted him to look for other possible ways of doing social critique without resorting to the elitism of philosophy, an opposite path from that of Althusser's.

It would have been easy to label the book as the personal settling of scores of a student

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<sup>170</sup> To provide a balanced view of Althusser and not to depict him as an antagonist in the context of the discussion, Nathan Brown's gives a picture of the historical context that surrounded Rancière's move against his teacher Althusser. He provided the context within which Althusser made his decisions and performed his actions. See Nathan Brown, "Red Years, Rancière's Error and the Real Movement of History," *Radical Philosophy* 170, (November/December 2011): 16-24.



whose relationship with his mentor had gone astray. Rancière, however, clarified that “the point [of the work] is not to condemn a discourse, as I say in concluding the book, but to reinscribe its argumentation, to bring it back into the concatenation of words used, now as in the past, to articulate both the inevitability of oppression and the hopes for liberation.”<sup>171</sup> Both in “On the Theory of Ideology” and in *Althusser’s Lesson*, Rancière explains that the goal is to emphasize the ideological mechanisms of power, which constrain the discourse of intellectuals in our societies.<sup>172</sup> These early texts provide an insight into the foundation of the problematic of Rancière’s philosophy, i.e., the implication of a theoretical practice based on a presupposition of inequality of intelligence. In particular, what are the implications of a theory espousing hierarchical division between those who are labeled as knowledgeable and those who are not for a practice of emancipation? Who are the subjects involved in a real political movement? These are the questions that dig into the roots of a method of critique and that attempt to see whether violence is done on that level.

### **Early Rancière on Political Subjectivity**

Althusser’s reading of Marx was the theoretical position used to support the revisionist view of 1968. Rancière saw how theory was used to oppose a concrete reality and denounce such a reality as driven by an ideology. Through this move, the voices of those who experienced oppression were drowned by theories of the intellectuals. This was the primary motivation for Rancière’s criticism of Althusser and the reason why the former would work on revealing the philosophical foundation of theories of domination, beginning with the work of Althusser before moving on to other influential thinkers.

Coupled with Rancière’s analysis of political theories is his study of the question of political agency. The question of political subjectivity was once again brought into the limelight

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<sup>171</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson*, XV.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

after the events of 1968. By that time, Althusser and Rancière have dissenting arguments on the matter of political subjectivity. In connection to his critique of the Althusserian reading of Marx as a philosophy of domination masked in order, Rancière viewed the political subject as possessing a capacity for thinking that is equal to each other. This is, of course, a complete turn away from his early position in *Reading Capital* where, along with Althusser, he argues that the subject is mystified. I need to examine the details of Rancière's early position on subjectivity in order to trace and show later on how his idea evolved.

Based on the abovementioned analysis, one of the central notions around which the debate revolves is the notion of subjectivity. In *Althusser's Lesson*, Rancière not only takes Althusser to task for his revisionist stance, which ends up disempowering the very movement his Marxist position should have endorsed and defended. In this first book, he covers the more specific issue of the correct theoretical approach to the problem of subjectivity. One of Althusser's key arguments to discredit the voices of the participants of May 1968 was founded on a philosophical critique of the notion of subjectivity.<sup>173</sup> In his famous *Reply to John Lewis*, Althusser argued that it is the masses, not man, who make history. For Althusser, the subject man is a creation of the bourgeoisie of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction against the God-centered argument of the medieval period. In other words, it is typically an ideological category, a concept used to entrench methodologically the theories, which, in turn, aim to explain and justify a particular class-based organization of society. Furthermore, history, for him, is a process without subjects, a mechanical process composed of structural relations between different functional levels in which human agents are only one function among others. The subject of this process is inherently mystified and generally does not possess any knowledge of the said process. Althusser bases his argument on the mature works of Marx where, according to his influential reading, Marx no longer talks about

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 121.

the subject but shifts his discussion to the structure of political economy. This, for Althusser, is a clear sign of Marx's theoretical anti-humanism.<sup>174</sup>

Rancière, however, notices that something seems to be amiss with this interpretation of Marx. Instead of leading to the goal of Marxism,<sup>175</sup> which is to deliver the subjects from the illusion of the capitalist, the subjects are further removed from liberation by making them incapable of knowing their real situation. If Marx was against humanism, how can the goal of worker's emancipation be achieved? If the human individual is not capable of thinking, then who are the participants of May 1968? Ultimately, who are the subjects of politics? These are the questions that guided Rancière's unmasking of Althusser's conceptual schemes.

The first step undertaken by Rancière in the book is to go back to Marx's criticism of Feuerbach to clarify what Marx said about the subject "man." Althusser argues that the concept of "man" is an ideology created by the growing bourgeoisie of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The ideological concept "man" was invented as a reaction against feudalism and its providential ideology.<sup>176</sup> Here, it is taken as a philosophical anti-thesis to the previous thesis of the medieval period: God. If God was unknown, then everything can be known about man. If God was controlling, then man is free and capable of doing what he desires to do. If God was the master of the old world, then man is the master of the new world. The concept of man was invented by the bourgeoisie to mark the end of the reign of God and shift the agency of history to man.

Rancière gave two replies to this argument. The first is that man is not the answer to the question "who makes history?" Rather, the question is "what makes man?" The bourgeoisie does not claim autonomy over history because their first question is about the nature of man.<sup>177</sup> They are therefore not interested in the subject of domination over a particular class because their central

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., XX.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 4.

concern was philosophical anthropology. Second, Rancière shows that, in his critique of Feuerbach, Marx is not objecting to the claim that “It is man who makes history.” In fact, Feuerbach never said this. Marx’s problem with the work of Feuerbach is that the latter’s subject is ahistorical.<sup>178</sup> Marx does not object to the fact that Feuerbach’s history has a subject, but he objects to the fact that Feuerbach’s subject has no history. Feuerbach’s philosophy is indeed humanistic, but his humanism does not go hand-in-hand with any historicism,<sup>179</sup> and this is precisely Marx’s problem with his work.

Tracing the argument of Feuerbach shows that Marx is arguably not anti-humanist and that if he had problems with Feuerbach’s concept of man, it is not because he is thinking that man is an ideology capable of domination but because Feuerbach’s conception of man is overly abstract. For Marx, it was enough to demonstrate that the man Feuerbach saw as the key to the critique of speculative history is, in fact, another abstraction, produced by the division between manual and intellectual labor from the historical existence of individuals.<sup>180</sup> Marx’s criticism of the subject in Feuerbach does not end up annihilating or negating the subject. In fact, Marx was all the more able to emphasize the point that for him, it is the concrete men who make up history. Rancière clarifies this confusion about Marx’s critique of Feuerbach critique in the following passages:

In his critique of Feuerbach, Marx does not pit the good subject of history against the bad; rather, he pits history – with its real, active subjects – against the contemplative and interpretative subjects of German ideology. He does not defend the ‘good’ thesis that ‘It is the masses which make history’ against the ‘bad’ thesis that ‘It is man who makes history’. He is satisfied to pit against Man ‘empirical’ individuals, that is, the men who are brought into specific social relations as a result of their need to reproduce their existence. In other words, it is not Man who makes history, but men – concrete individuals, those who produce the means of their existence, the ones who fight in the class struggle.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

Indeed, Marx was consistent with his stand from his early writings to the late ones with regard to his references to concrete human subjects of the class struggle, individuals from all ages and walks of life. When Marx talks about man in his early writings, this does not mean he has succumbed to the pressure of the bourgeois class in contrast to what Althusser wants us to believe.<sup>182</sup> Rancière argues that even behind the ideas of the mature Marx, e.g., the notion of commodity fetishism, the hopes and aspirations of the working class are still present and that it is only through these aspirations that the scientific Marx of *Capital* can be understood.<sup>183</sup> For Rancière,

The point from which it becomes possible to think the mystification of merchandise and understand the functioning of the capitalist system is that of the aspirations which fuel the workers' struggle: the association of 'free producers', of 'freely associated men' whose social relations and whose relations to their objects will one day be 'perfectly simple and intelligible'. An idea of the social stamp of work on objects which mirrors the contemporaneous dream of bronze workers on strike in Paris, the dream of a civilization of 'men who can breathe freely, and who stamp upon their work the indelible character of the social life they breathe'.<sup>184</sup>

In several of his writings, Marx proves that the struggles of the workers are embedded in the concrete fabric of their experience. In his theoretical discourses about political economy, the science of capital is only possible because of the labor practices of concrete men; *he is the point that makes the very design of science possible*.<sup>185</sup> The human subject's role in Marx's theoretical discourse is not a trivial role but a fundamental one because it is the labor practices of men that underpin the science of production.<sup>186</sup> As Rancière contends:

These brief indications are intended simply to suggest that maybe there isn't a Marxist conceptuality which must be saved from ideological doom and bourgeois invasions. There is not one logic in *Capital*, but many logics; it contains different

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>186</sup> Rancière enumerates a number of Marxist references to workers. ...man the free producer, although not the starting point of Marx's analytical method; nevertheless has a role to play in the Marx's theoretical discourse. Ibid., 94.

discursive strategies, each of which corresponds to different problems and each of which echoes, in many different ways, the discourses through which classes think themselves or confront an opposing discourse, be it the science of classical economists or the protests of workers, the discourse of philosophers or the reports of factory inspectors, and so on.<sup>187</sup>

Therefore, in this reading, the subject pertaining to concrete individuals remains to be an essential concept in Marxist philosophy. Contrary to what Althusser wants us to believe and what the young Rancière initially argued, i.e., Marx veered away from humanism in his works, Rancière post 1968 proves that such is not the case; in fact, the whole philosophy of Marx hinges on the historical subject man, concrete individuals who have lived, dreamt, and hoped and thus are capable of thinking of a better world for themselves. In a number of his writings, it is evident that for Marx, man is not as an abstract concept but a concrete and historical one. His struggles and pains brought about by oppressive conditions of labor are real and undeniable. When he brings the stories of his struggles in the street, he is not representing anybody else, nor is he under the illusion of a bourgeois political party. The laborer speaks and in his words, one can glimpse the same capacity for thinking that his capitalist employer possesses.

There are several ways to read the works of Marx, and shifting the discussion to the process of production does not necessarily mean that he has given up the concept of man as an ideology of the bourgeois. Marx can claim that it is man who makes history without being ideological because he was speaking from new materialism<sup>188</sup> founded on a history of human production and is therefore mostly descriptive of the facts of production.<sup>189</sup> When he talks about the struggles of the working class, Marx focuses on the concrete reality of the working class and does not use an elitist language of philosophy that reduces the subject to a mystified state, unlike Althusser whose agenda is to establish the primacy of philosophical discourse as the science. Althusser translates

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>188</sup> New materialism here pertains to a stance that shifts away from anthropocentrism and focuses in inhuman forces that affect the subject for instance laws of production in the capitalist economic system.

<sup>189</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, 27.

the political problem into the realm of a theoretical struggle. “The question of the subject of history becomes intertwined with the question of the object of knowledge.”<sup>190</sup> He removes man from history and argues that man knows nature better than history. This is what he does when he interprets Marx’s critique of Feuerbach as an anti-humanist. And for what purpose? By introducing a false symmetry, it clears the way for the idea that when it comes to history, there are several illusions that proletarian struggle requires nothing less than the intervention of philosophy.<sup>191</sup>

For Rancière, however, this gesture only repeats the old bourgeois pattern of domination by reasserting the divide between intellectual and manual work. By contrast, the subject for Marx is far from the mystified, helpless subject of Althusser. Marx himself, as well as Marxist leaders, always refers to the human subject. Indeed, as Rancière points out with irony in defiance of self-enclosed theoretical activity, by contrast, with the history of philosophy where everything has been said about the subject, to the point of even declaring it dead, “The only ones who dare speak of man without provisos or precautions are in fact workers.”<sup>192</sup> Behind this sarcastic point lies the deep reason that, from then on, sets Rancière apart from his teacher Althusser and several other philosophers of emancipation. Also, we can already see the direct implication of this key dividing point. Here, Rancière, thinking along the lines of the revolutionary Marx, recognizes the capacity of workers to think and speak for themselves as equally intelligent. From this argument, we can view the beginnings of Rancière’s original idea concerning subjectivity. In contrast to Althusser’s argument that the class struggle should be led by the philosopher who is the sole bearer of knowledge and that subjects are mystified, Rancière refers to the historical accounts of workers’ struggle to show that the issue is not the lack of a subject but, in fact, the positive content of class struggles throughout their history. Political struggles lead by a class are rooted in real experiences of the people (i.e., suffering, injustices, feelings of solidarity, and so on). They are not empty

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 84.

revolutions lead by masses, which are misguided. If the people struggled against class exploitation, it was because they felt, lived and thought about their circumstances. When people engaged in mass revolt, it is not merely to complain and decry their sufferings. More importantly, people have imagined an alternative world governed by themselves where solidarity and fraternal love thrives. As Rancière writes:

‘Proletarian science’ might have been hopeless in biology, but it was not so bad when it came to physics, nor did its banners flap in the void. Indeed, if they flapped so loudly, it is because they were filled with the same wind that held aloft the banners of the conquerors of Stalingrad and of Mao’s army as it marched towards Nanjing. It is, above all, because they flapped in the same sky against which rang out the slogans of striking miners and the bullets of Jules Moch’s fusillades. It would be good to reread the texts from this period, particularly those in the first issue of *La Nouvelle Critique*, for they show clearly enough that the issue was not the void, but the positivity borne by the manifest sense of a struggle.<sup>193</sup>

Rancière’s conception of subjectivity as founded on the presupposition of equality directly derives from this initial debate. Equality in the capacity to think is what enables the workers to emerge as political subjects and articulate their claims to their masters. Althusser’s work presupposes, “That only the bourgeoisie think and that – so long as workers have not learned the science of intellectuals – the man, the laws and the freedom that workers talk about are, at best, the inverse expression of the relations of domination they endure.”<sup>194</sup> Against this, Rancière, seeks to defend equality, and in order to do so, he goes to the historical accounts of the workers where workers claim: “We are men like you. To refer to us as slaves is to also to treat us slaves.”<sup>195</sup>

Thus, this is how Rancière began his journey to rethink political subjectivity from the premise of equality, i.e., by referring to the real words of real workers. In *Althusser’s Lesson*, there is no complete account of political subjectivity yet. What we find instead are hints of the work that Rancière would embark on in the following decades of his philosophical career: to uncover the words of the workers that demonstrate their capacity to think, thereby establishing the equality that

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.



is both the platform and the demand of emancipatory struggles. In “How to Use *Lire Le Capital*”, Rancière began to highlight the importance of giving attention to the workers’ speech functions. Althusser also recognized words as weapons of theoretical discourse, but the only words he was willing to account for, were the words of the intellectuals. Rancière, on the other hand, goes to the opposite direction, particularly in the direction of the voices from the workers who experienced oppression and who were willing to demonstrate that they were human beings capable of reason. Rancière will echo the expressions of these political subjects in several of his writings to stage a new kind of political subjectivity infused with creative intelligence as manifested in the words of the workers that he will discuss in the following decades of his work.

The analysis in this chapter demonstrates that the entry point to political discourse is made possible through the speech functions and words of workers who are not merely insisting or demanding that they should be heard, but rather who speak to tell their stories. This means that in his early works, Rancière has started to see and, in fact, want others to see that workers are capable of speech, which means that they are capable of thinking and that this thinking contains what consists their experiences. While the focus of Rancière’s writings in the 60s and 70s are criticisms of his former position, we can surmise that the alternative to this position he suggests lies in a rich account of subjectivity and agency of people who were previously excluded from the discourse.

### Chapter 3

#### Rancière's Complex Relation to Marx

Following the discussion of Rancière's engagement with his intellectual mentor Althusser, I will now expound on Rancière's complex link with Marx and Marxism as he continued to develop his own method of equality in *Proletarian Nights*. This discussion will focus first on Rancière's return to his initial anthropological reading of Marx and his effort to prove Althusser's reading of Marx as an erroneous reading, by examining the archives of the working class. Later on, however, Rancière perceived in Marx a similar theoretical elitism he found in Althusser. This chapter demonstrates how Rancière deconstructs Marx and the Marxist view of the subject to allow finally the political subjects to 'speak in their own words,' as Rancière shows in *Proletarian Nights*. These subjects, who initially claimed the recognition of the equality of their intelligence with their bourgeois masters through words, later on reveal themselves as more than mere subjects who speak but also subjects who feel, who dream, who have bodies that experience the world, who desire emancipation, and who have their own ways of making sense of their political condition.

In this chapter, I will focus on some of Rancière's 1970s and 1980s texts after *Althusser's Lesson* in which he explores what he describes in the said book as a "plurality of Marxist conceptuality". The complicated move of reverting to his initial anthropological reading of Marx after his break with Althusser, is essential for Rancière's development of his method of allowing the subjects to speak using their own voice, which negates Althusser's narrative of the master thinker. Such a move first entails the recognition of the individual subject present in the early Marx; but eventually a move away from Marx's conception of a 'revolutionary subject' whom according to Rancière, Marx believes has nothing to lose but his chains. This chapter is important for the broader goal of the thesis that aims to draw out the subject of politics and what can be learned from this political subject, at this specific context in Rancière's thinking where Marx is a major influence. Furthermore, tracing the development of political subjectivation in this period of

Rancière's thought contributes to the alternative reading of Rancière that is more focused on political subjectivity.

### **From Marx and beyond Marx**

In the previous chapter, I discussed Rancière's decisive move away from his intellectual mentor Louis Althusser. As I have shown in the previous chapter, this move hinges on a criticism of theoreticism and Althusser's failure to acknowledge the capacity of the political subject to recognize her own situation of being mystified by ideology. Rancière accuses Althusser of forgetting the real essence of Marxist philosophy, i.e. of being a theory of revolutionary praxis. Reframed as "the philosophy" of the Communist Party, Marxism loses its connection to the source of its existence and purpose, the individuals comprising the working class. Moreover, Rancière emphasizes that Althusser's reading of Marx, which pitted science against ideology, curbs the potential of mass revolt, since according to such reading, ideology renders "every social structure as necessarily opaque to its agents."<sup>196</sup> This assertion means that political subjects are inherently mystified and incapable of mobilizing on their own.

In response to Althusser, Rancière refers to Marx and demonstrates Althusser's failure to see that Marx did not render the subject as mystified. In fact, Marx referred to political subjects as concrete and historical subjects whose struggles were as real as their existence. It is in *Althusser's Lesson* where Rancière first argued that there is a plurality of Marxist conceptuality, "each of which echoes, in many different ways, the discourses through which classes think themselves or

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<sup>196</sup> Jacques Rancière, "On the Theory of Ideology" in *Althusser's Lesson*, (UK/USA: Continuum, 2011), 130.

confront an opposing discourse...<sup>197</sup> Evident in this passage is the fact that, in his early writings after the break from Althusser, Rancière's ties to Marx remains firm.

Positing that there are numerous conceptualities in Marx means that for Rancière, *Capital* is not the kind of unified conceptual machine that Althusser and the structuralists describe it to be with their new science of dialectical and historical materialism. It is not a weapon against idealist bourgeois philosophy, which has a single task of weeding out ideology from Marx's work in order for it to be saved from "ideological doom and bourgeois invasions."<sup>198</sup> Rancière challenges the Althusserian reading and argues that in fact the plurality of Marxist conceptualities demonstrates that Marx was responding as a theorist to the experiences of the people, which includes their actual discourses and actions.

These Marxist conceptualities comprised of both objective and subjective dimensions inform Marx's theoretical work. For instance, exploitation's objective dimension pertains to the economic laws of capitalism while its subjective dimension includes the suffering and alienation of the worker. The negative experiences of the workers are met with workers' struggles i.e. Resistance, revolution, organization, and establishing their own politics and the conduct of their own education in order to alleviate their social conditions. And these forms of struggle also have an objective and a subjective aspect. The objective dimension of resistance is the contestation of workers' rights, which stem from the subjective capacity to imagine a different world. The many

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<sup>197</sup> The complete quote states, "These brief indications are intended simply to suggest that maybe there isn't a Marxist conceptuality which must be saved from ideological doom and bourgeois invasions. There is not one logic in *Capital*, but many logics; it contains different discursive strategies, each of which corresponds to different problems and each of which echoes, in many different ways, the discourses through which classes think themselves or confront an opposing discourse, be it the science of classical economists or the protests of workers, the discourse of philosophers or the reports of factory inspectors, and so on. The plurality of these conceptualities is also a manifestation, not of 'class struggle in theory', but of the effects that class struggle and its discursive forms have had on the discourse of theoreticians. Those who pretend to isolate the 'scientificity' of Marxist discourse from every non-scientific element are far from being at the end of their pains. And those who want to draw a dividing line between 'petit bourgeois' and 'proletarian' concepts have only touched the surface of their discontent. See Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, 81.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

Marxist conceptualities which can be found in *Capital* are in fact “echoes” of proletarian discourse that seek to capture in thought the proletarian experience that encompass Marx’s theory.

Rancière was strongly influenced by how Marx used these proletarian conceptualities in writing his theory and analysis of capitalist logic. From Marx’s example on how to do theory, Rancière advanced his unique position, that it is not the philosopher who leads the people but it is the people who teaches the philosopher about what to analyze and how to theorize through their experiences and their discourses. Contrary to the idea that the subject is mystified, Rancière picking up the many conceptualities that he finds in Marx’s text, asserts that the lived experiences of the workers, their everyday ordeals in the factories and their struggle to have better working conditions, make them the most reliable authority when it comes to their own experience as workers, and thus in fact they are not misguided, mystified or confused.

Rancière would confirm this argument, that there are numerous Marxist conceptualities, in the following years after publishing his first major work. In the 1970s, he undertook the project of archival research on the writings of 19<sup>th</sup>-century workers in France. One of the impetuses for this project was "to measure the gap between the actual history of social movements and the conceptual system inherited from Marx."<sup>199</sup> Clearly, the project was not against Marx but a critique of the conceptual system inherited from Marx i.e., Althusserian Marxism and its application by the French Communist Party at that time. Working on this project, Rancière, however, realized that while it is conceptually impossible to escape from the Marxist model of critical discourse, it is also impossible to ignore the heterogeneity of the proletarian discourse.<sup>200</sup> Eventually, such realization led to a gradual distancing from Marx, which developed further during the archival work and later on led to Rancière’s critique of Marx himself.

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<sup>199</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Preface to the English Edition” in *Staging the People: The Proletarian and his Double*, translated by David Fernbach, London, New York: Verso, 2011, 7.

<sup>200</sup> Emmanuel Renault, “The Many Marx of Jacques Rancière,” in *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality* ed by. Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross. Continuum. London & New York. 2012, 179.

In contrast to his abrupt move away from Althusser, the severing of ties with Marx happened at different moments of Rancière's thinking. When he began the journal *Logical Revolts* in 1975, he was still a Marxist adhering to revolutionary Marxism as a counter-position to the scientific Marxism of Althusser. Toward the late 1980s and nearing the end of his work in *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière began his critique of Marx. The second stage of this move away from Marx only became more pronounced in a later work, *The Philosopher and his Poor* (*Le Philosophe et ses Pauvres*, 1983) where Rancière criticizes Marx for being a "bourgeois with classical tastes"<sup>201</sup> and having contempt for proletarians who detach from their proletarian identification and insists on being artists, philosophers, or anything other than being a proletarian. The third phase is the publication in 1995 of *La Méésentente* (*Disagreement* 1999) where Rancière interprets Marx's political philosophy as a suppression of real politics along with those of Plato's and Aristotle's. Here, Rancière views Marx's method of demystification as incompatible with the workers' emancipation. For Rancière, the Marxist method of demystification is tantamount to arguing that the dominated is incapable of seeing his own situation.

These complex engagements with Marx have had several perceivable effects on Rancière's work, for they created fruitful tensions in his work that would eventually enable him to clarify his own meaning of emancipation, his method of equality, and his notion of political subjectivation. Because my research aims to examine the notion of the political subject, the following discussion deals with Rancière's engagement with Marx in *Logical Revolts*, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, and *Disagreement* to demonstrate that these works, including *Proletarian Nights*, are the decisive texts in Rancière's career, which, in fact, made him turn away from Marx and allowed him to develop a rich account of 'political subjects' and of the process of 'political subjectivation.'

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid, 181.

## Logical Revolts

The journal *Logical Revolts* (“Les Révoltes Logique”) was established in 1975 at the founding of the Center for Research on the Ideologies of Revolt (Centre de Recherche sur les Idéologies de Révolte, CRIR) of which it was the main publication. Rancière and several other Maoist militant thinkers founded the center to house their individual research. They aimed to develop an alternative approach to social history following the events of May 1968. Jason Frank describes that: “For the philosophers and historians of the LRI collective, the events of May ’68 not only demonstrated the failure of theoretical paradigms invoked by historians and social scientists to explain the dynamics of popular rebellion – humanist or structural Marxism, moral economics, or inherently resistant popular cultures – but also demonstrated that these frameworks were ultimately complicit with, and supportive of, the dominant orders they sought to critique”<sup>202</sup> The journal contributors were bound by a common interest on the question of working-class identity. In *The Method of Equality*, Rancière recalls that at the time of its inception, the journal was meant to be, “a new lease of life or a way out, with historical research that was at the same time linked to the big questions behind the militant movement of the 1970s.”<sup>203</sup> This position is in the context of the failure of the far-left to create a new revolutionary movement after 1968 and the revisionist effort to downplay the potential of mass revolt.<sup>204</sup> At this particular point, Rancière and the contributors of *Logical Revolts* were arguing against several adversaries, including Marxist dogmatism (Althusserian Marxists, sociologists, historians and the French Communist Party) which tended to set aside the accounts of the proletarians about themselves.

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<sup>202</sup> Jason Frank, “Logical Revolts: Jacques Rancière and Political Subjectivization,” *Political Theory* 43, no. 2 (Sage Publications 2015), 249.

<sup>203</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality: Interviews with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan*, translated by Julie Rose, UK: Polity Press, 2016, 40.

<sup>204</sup> Althusser discredits the revolt of 1968 by saying that it is a revolution led by confused students. Rancière, “Preface to the English Edition” in *Staging the People: The Proletarian and his Double*.

*Logical Revolts* suggested a distinctive kind of revolt as it attempted to act as counter-knowledge to the elitism of the theoretical practices that were once again threatening to impose an account of the proletarian experience from outside. The journal withdrew from the theoretical thinking of the elite historians and sociologists and, at the same time, attempted to take mass practices from a philosophical point-of-view as it endeavored to examine the contradictions and potentials of social struggles.<sup>205</sup> The form of revolt the journal demonstrated was not by means of theories of scholars and thinkers but through the words of the workers themselves. Inspired by Rimbaud's poem "Democracy" wherein the poet wrote that "what is called rebellion or revolt is also a scene of speech and reasons...",<sup>206</sup> the journal endeavored to look for the writings of the workers, artisans, women and militants in the archives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century working class who founded their own associations and wrote newspapers for themselves. The primary aim of *Logical Revolts* was to make explicit a social history from below by focusing on the words of the people who showed their equal capacity for thinking with everybody else. Kristin Ross in her Book *May '68 and its Afterlives* quotes *Logical Revolts*' description of its project:

*Révoltes Logique* wishes simply to listen again to what social history has shown and resituate, in its debates and what it has at stake, the thought from below. The gap between the official genealogies of subversion - for example, "the history of the workers' movement"- and its real forms of elaboration, circulation, reappropriation, resurgence...With the simple idea that class struggle doesn't cease to exist, just because it doesn't conform to what one learns about it in school (or from the State, the Party or the *groupuscule*) ...*Révoltes Logique* ... will try to follow the transversal paths of revolt, its contradictions, its lived experience and its dreams.<sup>207</sup>

It is clear in the above quotation that those who founded the journal wanted to focus not only on the words but also on the concrete experiences of the workers as proof of the ongoing class

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<sup>205</sup> Mischa Suter, "A Thorn in the Side of Social History: Jacques Rancière and Les Révoltes Logiques." *International Review of Social History* 57, no. 1, (April 2012), 65.

<sup>206</sup> The journal title was taken from Rimbaud's poem Democracy where the poet writes that "what is called rebellion of revolt is also a scene of speech and reasons" Rancière, *Staging the people*, 10.

<sup>207</sup> Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002, 128.



struggle, which is in contrast to those who attempted to discredit it. The journal strongly differentiates its approach by highlighting that it wishes ‘simply to listen.’ Basically, the aim of the project was to resound the discourses of the 19<sup>th</sup> century workers through an engagement with their words without the imposition of interpretation of any theory from above and outside in order to draw out a concrete history of their struggles and the way in which they imagined an alternative to the sufferings that they encountered. As Deranty commented, “The programme of research is clear: to undercut theoretical accounts of the social question that have been developed from outside and imposed from above, and instead, to let the workers speak for themselves, to read seriously and reconstruct painstakingly their own efforts of expression and organization.”<sup>208</sup> This aim is premised on the observation that “what is said about workers and what workers said about themselves were often different things.”<sup>209</sup> The politics of political representation and the established theories of militant action often paint an image of the proletariat that is far from the worker’s experience of herself.

Rancière contends that any external form of representation or identification is problematic because such imposition of identity becomes a source of oppression. His reply to this is a particular kind of history that does justice to the voices of the people by allowing the words of these very individuals to materialize an image of the working class that is from and by the proletarians themselves. This is the work Rancière undertook beginning from *Logical Revolts* and the very method that differentiates him from other thinkers during his time.

The project of *Logical Revolts* is likewise a form of revolt against the schemas of class-consciousness and actions imposed on a particular class. Rancière elucidates, “If the history that *Les Révoltes Logiques* sought to apply had an activist aim, it was not only by using work on the past to cast light on the problems of political struggle today. It was also by questioning the practices

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<sup>208</sup> Jean-Philippe Logical Revolts in *Jacques Rancière Key Concepts*. ed. by Jean-Philippe Deranty, Durham, UK: Acumen.. 2010, 19.

<sup>209</sup> Kristin Ross, *May 1968 and its Afterlives*, 129.

of identification common to the discourse of both activist vanguards and academic historians.”<sup>210</sup>

The weapons of this revolt are the *logos* or the words of the workers, i.e., reports of engineering workers, musical-instrument makers, shoemakers, workers in leather and skins, joiners, women in factories, and so on. Kristin Ross describes this method succinctly: “Words themselves are part of the struggle- not the words of people speaking “for” the masses, but simply people speaking at all.”<sup>211</sup> These workers were not tied to a specific definition of the working class but were, in fact, going against their identification as workers who did not have time for activities other than their crafts. The individuals Rancière specifically highlighted were the characters who had profound thoughts and insights about their conditions and would often engage in activities other than their designated work.<sup>212</sup> In *Logical Revolts* Rancière began the project of discovering “a polemical form of subjectivation that is drawn along particular lines of fracture.”<sup>213</sup> Following up on the initial intuition of his analyses from *Reading Capital* up until *Althusser’s Lesson* wherein the subject occupies a central position in politics, Rancière pursues the project of thinking about politics with the political subject at its center. Only that his method is unique because rather than thinking of the political subject as an ontological given, Rancière was more pre-occupied with the process of subjectivation.

The move to expose the writings of the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century workers had some fundamental consequences for Rancière's relationship to Marx. In the first half of this engagement, Rancière was fully a Marxist who attempted to rekindle the flame of revolutionary Marx by criticizing the Marxist dogmatists’ representation of the proletarian class. Emmanuel Renault remarks that at this period of Rancière’s work, the latter recognized that it was somehow politically impossible to

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<sup>210</sup> Jacques Rancière, Preface to the English Edition in *Staging the People: The Proletarian and his Double*, 13.

<sup>211</sup> Kristin Ross, *May 1968 and its Afterlives*, 129.

<sup>212</sup> Rancière's example would be Gauny who insisted on being a philosopher.

<sup>213</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Preface to the English Edition” in *Staging the People: The Proletarian and his Double*, 15.

escape from Marx's discourse as a model of critical discourse.<sup>214</sup> One proof of this assumption can be found in the articles of *Logical Revolts* published in 1975 and 1976. No explicit references to Marx can be found in these writings, but the language that Rancière used to analyze the conditions of the working class was strongly influenced by Marxist discourse, employing Marxist concepts such as division of labor, class consciousness, domination, alienation, exploitation, and so on. For instance, in "Off to the Exhibition: The Worker, His Wife and the Machine (1975)", Rancière explicates workers' experiences of alienation upon the arrival of machines in the factories. He describes this development in the following words: "The division of labour is indicated as the essential cause of all the negative effects of mechanization: it dispossesses the worker of control over his labour and chains him alive to the machine."<sup>215</sup> In another passage from the same article, Rancière describes the experience of dispossession in a manner that sounded like Marx and which seemingly implies that these workers' experiences are the source of Marx's analysis in *Capital*. As Rancière explains separately in the same article:

A spectacle of dispossession, therefore: the machines belong to the employer, the new avatar of capital; the mechanization of production deskills labour by means of intense division, and tends to deprive the workers of the practical source of their right to dispose of the product of their labour.<sup>216</sup>

The workers of 1848 claimed labour as a right. The right to labour gives a right to live from the product of one's labour; a minimal right that justifies the claim for a minimum wage, defined in reference to a set of socially defined needs: 'Each individual who works has the right to a wage sufficient to meet his needs.'<sup>217</sup>

These passages clearly indicate that Rancière investigates and seeks for a confirmation of Marx through real discourses of the people. Hence, he obviously goes against the ideas of structuralism and counter argues that there are universal conceivable ways of theorizing these

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<sup>214</sup> Emmanuel Renault, "The Many Marx of Rancière," 179.

<sup>215</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Off to the Exhibition: The Worker, His Wife and the Machines," in *Staging the People: The Proletarian and his Double*, 68.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 71.

unique and concrete experiences of suffering and injustice. Once again, it is through looking at these negative proletarian experiences, such as deskilling of labor, alienation from the product of labor, inequality in wages, etc., that Marx derives the content of his theory. In addition to this, Rancière following through the works of Marx arrived at a fundamental intuition that workers can also think and reflect on their own. In the early 70's Rancière remained a Marxist but already emphasized the equality of intelligence without naming it as such. Later on, despite his distance from Marx, he would retain this fundamental intuition and the rest of his work would be to develop it. This is evident in the passage below where Rancière refers to the content of workers' reports:

Capitalist mechanization corrupts the body, numbs the intelligence, and abandons the unskilled worker to degeneration; the workers' reports imagine what a social and moral use of machines would be.<sup>218</sup>

The archival research, which Rancière began in *Logical Revolts*, demonstrates that political subjects are not necessarily ignorant and mystified but they can develop their own thoughts. The subject who suffers, who is exploited and is believed by theorists to be mystified can develop their own ideas of how they could live differently. It is obvious in the above quote that Rancière wants to highlight that despite the numbing effect of labor in both the body and the mind, workers are still able to reflect on what is happening around them. This reference to workers' capacity to think is very important for my question on political subjectivity and thus the rest of my thesis will demonstrate how Rancière took up the thought about "equality of intelligence" that he discovered first in his critique of Althusserian Marxism and second through his archival research. The rest of Rancière's political writings following on from *Logical Revolts* will be a documentation and theorization of the point that people are intelligent and capable of articulating how they feel and what they experience and how they could live differently. His idea on the "equality of intelligence"

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 74.

is one of Rancière's points of departure in his distancing away from Marx to form his own ideas about the political subject.

Still in line with the project of *Logical Revolts* and of criticizing the way Marxist dogmatists represent proletarians both in theory and in practice, Rancière now turns to a critique of the French Communist Party who was also guilty of an elitist position deeming workers as 'backwards,' misguided and incapable of autonomy. In another essay published in 1976 titled "The Links of the Chain: Proletarians and Dictatorships," Rancière discusses the philosophical, theoretical, and political ambiguities in the French Communist Party (PCF). In this article, very few but direct references were made to the Marxist discourse as the discourse that should have been the model for a workers' revolution but ended up being the opposite. The references to Marx and the vocabulary of the article, which remains predominantly Marxist proves that in these early articles, Rancière has not totally distanced himself from Marx. Rancière during this period traced the trajectory of the PCF and identified that the party's turn to the paradigm of the Russian Revolution is problematic for the political subject. This is because, similar to the Althusserian Marxist position, the PCF's view on the Russian Revolution denied the workers of self-determination and capacity to survive on their own specially when it described the peasants who participated in the revolution as 'backward' and in need of the guidance of the *Party*. Rancière describes below:

'Backward' and hungry Russia now imposed a new image that would strengthen the sense of a degeneration of the working-class ideal: the revolution was now borne forward not by the capacity of working masses to manage society, but simply by their inability to subsist. And if revolution was the work of hunger – not of idealism – this meant that the masses came to stage initially under the aspect of bellies to feed – a situation that the necessity of dictatorship and makes this a *party* matter.<sup>219</sup>

The former ideology of labour versus Capital, of the autonomy of producers, which had authorized Marx's discourse – even in his critical distance from it – was

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<sup>219</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Links of the Chain: Proletarian and Dictatorships," *Staging the People: The Proletarian and his Double*, 116.

destroyed at the very moment that the era of twentieth-century revolutions was opening.<sup>220</sup>

In 1976, Rancière criticized PCF on the issue of not recognizing the workers' capacity to think for themselves and lead their own revolution. The image of the working class that the party adhered to followed the problematic model of dogmatic Marxists who discredited workers' capacity to articulate their own experience and imagine a different way of organizing society. As Rancière describes in the second passage above, the PCF stance was obviously against Marx himself who still recognized the autonomy of the proletarians. In fact, for Rancière, the PCF discredited the very material that informs Marx's discourse when it turned towards the paradigm of 20<sup>th</sup> century revolution. This essay still cites what matters to Rancière, which he finds in Marx that is the capacity of workers to govern themselves.

It is interesting to note, however, that in this 1970s essay in which Rancière implicitly acknowledged the inevitability of the Marxist model of discourse, he was, at the same time, already starting to rediscover the proletariat of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in France. He was beginning to notice a working class distinct from the proletariat conceptualized by Marx. This discovery served as the impetus for Rancière to distance himself from Marx and criticize the latter. Rancière presents how Marx restricted the proletarians to only two possibilities, either to the task of building the barricades for revolution, or of working themselves to exhaustion in hard labor. For Rancière, the class politics of Marx endorses political conservatism.<sup>221</sup> Rancière in *Logical Revolts*, emphasized the gap between Marxist theory and the heterogeneity of the workers' discourse. Thus, in the late 1970s, before *Proletarian Nights* was published, Rancière ended up fully distancing himself away from Marx.

In the preface to *Logical Revolts*, which was written many years later, Rancière states that the archival work he had undertaken in the 1970s was a response to two representations of the

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>221</sup> Emmanuel Renault, "The Many Marx of Rancière," 180.

proletariat, which emerge from two opposing sides. These opposing sides he was pertaining were both attempts to get away from Marxist dogmatism, which ended up undervaluing the struggles and emancipatory projects that were attached to the revolution of the people. On one side of these two opposing camps were Marxists activists, sociologists, social scientists who claimed to have discovered a proletariat that was “firmly rooted, more lighthearted and more playful than the austere proletariat of Marxist theory”<sup>222</sup> Rancière describes this newly discovered people by Marxists with irony:

...we had a noisy and colorful people, reminiscent of what leftist activists glimpsed in their efforts to plumb the depths of the pays réel, but also a people that conformed well to its essence, well rooted in its place and time, ready to move from the heroic legend of the poor to the positivity of silent majority.<sup>223</sup>

The problem with this proletarian image is that it trivializes the rigor of proletarian discourse and focuses on a noisy celebration of a group of people caricatured through popular culture. The workers are represented as a superficial group of people whose struggles in the past are to be celebrated rather than treated as serious discourses that could be a material for study. Once again, the proletariat is confined to the image of a noisy group of people whose only goal is to enjoy.

At the opposite side of this celebrated and popularized proletarian image is another image of workers portrayed as victims of the totalitarian regime and whose suffering was not considered as part of political discourse but of ethics. Because the poor workers have suffered too much, thus, a new group of intellectuals should speak “in the name of the victims of that ‘new world.’”<sup>224</sup> Rancière describes this group of intellectuals who have made it their task to represent workers whom they deem as the ‘victims of the totalitarian regime’ in the passage below:

In the guise of a critique of Marxism a strange operation was carried out, keeping all the dogmatism of *a priori* opposition and the power of self-proclaimed vanguards,

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<sup>222</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Preface to the English Edition” in *Staging the People: The Proletarian and his Double*, 8.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

while simply dropping the struggles and emancipatory project to which these had been attached.<sup>225</sup>

Rancière dubs these intellectuals as the “nouveaux philosophes,” new philosophers and thinkers who have shifted the discourse on proletarian emancipation away from politics and towards the ethics of individual rights and legal protection<sup>226</sup> or what Rancière would later theorize as the ethical turn of “postpolitics.” The new philosophers who claimed to speak for the suffering proletarians framed proletarian suffering and experience as a separate discourse from politics. Once again, the proletarians are excluded from politics because they lack agency and capacity, and because they are intellectually incapacitated to think for themselves. Both the Party and the new philosophers share the idea about the inability of proletarians to participate in politics. They also neglect the emancipatory movements led by proletarians in various historical periods in the past.

This fundamental insight was the main reason why Rancière would read through letters, journals, and pamphlets of workers who denied the identity and representation imposed on them by Marxist dogmatists, through engaging in activities different from their work. In the *Proletarian and his Double* (1981), Rancière contends: “The workers spoke in order to say that they were not those Others, those ‘barbarians’ that bourgeois discourse denounced, and whose positive existence we subsequently sought to discover.”<sup>227</sup> The workers' exchanges with each other about their pains, fantasies, and hopes were no different from the “agitation and chattering of intellectuals.”<sup>228</sup>

The work on the articles published in *Logical Revolts*, enabled Rancière to recover a proletariat that is different from that of the Marxist dogmatists. Such proletarians were thinking individuals who often negated the identity imposed on them by their social class. These proletarians would be the main characters of *Proletarian Nights*. And by the time *The Philosopher*

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<sup>225</sup> Rancière, “Preface to the English Edition” in *Staging the People: The Proletarian and his Double*, 9.

<sup>226</sup> Jason Frank, “Logical Revolts: Jacques Rancière and Political Subjectivization.” 250.

<sup>227</sup> Jacques Rancière, “The Proletarian and his Double, or, The Unknown Philosopher,” in *Staging the People: The Proletarian and his Double* and “Heretical Knowledge and the Emancipation of the Poor,” 22.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.



*and his Poor* was written many years later, Rancière had a clear notion that political subjectivation is not identification. It is, in fact, the struggle to move away from a given identity to become other than the helpless proletarian of Marx. It is in fact dis-identification from an imposed identification of being poor and incapable.

Thus, in this the first stage of Rancière's move away from Marx, Rancière was still very much of a Marxist. With Marx, he argued that many philosophers and thinkers often define proletarians based on their incapacity to achieve emancipation for themselves. Often, they are treated as objects of knowledge to be demystified and to be taught about their own conditions. After *Logical Revolts*, Rancière had a slight change of perspective. From a position of revolutionary Marx, Rancière now reveals Marx as bourgeois just like other thinkers who have restricted the proletarian identity on an emancipation that can only be fulfilled through a revolution. This stance became very clear in *The Philosopher and his Poor*.

### **The Philosopher and his Poor**

In *The Philosopher and his Poor*, Rancière undertakes a critique of how philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Marx, Bourdieu, and Sartre have treated their “poor.” Broadly speaking, the book contains the same conceptual problem Rancière identified in his earlier works beginning from Althusser's *Lesson*, i.e., the question of how certain theories hiding behind the guise of criticizing social order can become tools for domination. Specifically, Rancière attempts to answer this question by examining the relationship between philosophy and how some philosophers have treated the “proletariat” in their works. In this text, Rancière was mostly interested in the question, “how can those whose business is not thinking assume the authority to think and thereby constitute themselves as thinking subjects?”<sup>229</sup> This line of questioning exhibits two facets of the problem that preoccupy the work of Rancière. On the one hand, the question of theory and, on the other,

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<sup>229</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, edited and introduced by Andrew Parker, translated by John Drury, Corrine Oster, and Andrew Parker, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004. xxvi.

the implications of this theory to how the proletariats constitute themselves as the subject of these discourses.

The book likewise represents the second stage of Rancière's transition away from Marx. With *Logical Revolts* and *Proletarian Nights*, we see Rancière criticizing the stance of Marxist dogmatists as well as disclosing the contradictions within Marx's conception of class and Marxist conception of politics to draw out the real working class and the subject of politics. In these two key texts, Rancière's archival work plays a pivotal role because it was through their own voices that the proletarians revealed themselves. Through this move, Rancière began to discover a face of the proletariat, which is far from the descriptions of even Marx. Furthermore, such a discovery, later on led him to his strong criticism of Marx as a bourgeois philosopher who shuns any mixed notion of the proletarian. Rancière argues in *The Philosopher and his Poor* that, for Marx, the proletarian does not possess any capacity or agency to be otherwise than their identity as workers whose main task is that of revolution. In this case, any mixture of identity or any attempt to abandon the identity of a proletarian is unacceptable. This argument can be likened to Plato's who designed the order of the city and prohibited social mobility in his *Republic*.

The problem of acknowledging individual agency is explicit in Rancière's criticism of Marx. For the former, Marx has forgotten the individuals who comprise the proletarian collective. Moreover, Rancière specifically identifies Marx's shortcomings in terms of the discourses of the poor, namely that Marx is guilty of: (1) dispossession of agency and the creative capacity of labor by confining the proletariat to the task of revolution, which means (2) limiting the proletariat to a particular identification of production and using the words "nothing else, only, merely" to define their work activities. With these specific points of criticism, we find the same problematic treatment of the proletarian in Marx as pinpointed by Rancière in his work, i.e., the individual agency within the collective, therefore the question: Who is the subject of politics?

Rancière now identifies in Marx the same theory of ideology present in Althusser. Both philosophers characterized their proletariat as ignorant, if not, incapable of escaping from their

social conditions.<sup>230</sup> In Marx's works, the proletarians, despite being the agents of emancipation, are generally helpless with respect to the material condition of their existence. Rancière takes this against Marx and interprets it as a deliberate effort by the latter as a dehumanization of the proletarian class. Such is a calculated move of stripping them of their inherent capacities to think and tend for themselves. Rancière argues:

People "make" history but they do not know they do so. The formula can be developed ad infinitum. The world is populated by people who "do," who only express what they are in what they do and what they do in what they are, but who cannot "do" without fabricating for themselves a knowledge that is always besides what they are.<sup>231</sup>

Rancière highlights the fact that proletarians make history, yet they are unaware of this because their own understanding of history is limited to their production work. Moreover, the primacy of production, for Marx, postpones the role of the proletarian to revolt. One of the most significant contributions of Marx to the realm of theory, that is, 'historical materialism' has confined man to a history of production. Marx has given the world an elaborate theory of labor; but, at the same time, this theory of production has restricted the worker to the fixed identity of a laborer. Rancière elaborates:

For Marx, the workers are defined by production and nothing else. They are not allowed to be anything other than producers of material subsistence. "Daily and hourly": a curious echo of the Platonic rule concerning the absence of time whose function is no longer to attach men of iron to their place but to recall this point to knights and philosophers who think themselves kings. In effect, the commandment of "nothing else" shifts its place as the worker's rule of life becomes the golden rule, the very rationality of discourse. The impossibility of "anything else"

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<sup>230</sup> This is in reference to Marx words in the 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. The exact quote states. "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language." Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. (1852) <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>> (accessed March 2017).

<sup>231</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, 132-133.

becomes the general law of history that resounds obsessively through the rhetoric of the German Ideology or the Manifesto of the Communist Party.”<sup>232</sup>

Here, Rancière refers to the final call to action issued by Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*, which states: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.”<sup>233</sup>

Rancière has quite a fatalistic interpretation of this statement for the workers as he writes:

“Only,” “merely,” “nothing but,” “no further,” “simply”: these adverbs and similar phrases, if they are not to be the lonely agents of the monotonous labor of demystification, must form the other side of the positive principle that unifies the historical process, production.”<sup>234</sup>

Marx’s call to action reduces the workers to the structure of production, for it recognizes that what the workers can “only do” is to lose their chains through revolution. This consequence puts the proletarian in an ambiguous situation because on the one hand, they have a task to perform, but on the other, the only way to do this is to stay as what they are. In the end, they are helpless proletarians who are tied to the process of production and who need to sustain their needs. Thus, the proletarians’ capacity to revolt is not based on what they have but on an agency deprived of them. Rancière comments,

"The stern but steeling school of labor"... "What he learns at work is to lose his status as a worker... If the proletariat comes to be the agent of history, it is not because it "creates everything" but because it is dispossessed of everything - not only of the "wealth" it "created" but especially of its "creative" power, i.e., the limits of the "dedicated" worker realizing himself in "his" product."<sup>235</sup>

Rancière criticizes Marx’s notion of emancipation as self-contradictory, for whereas Marx argues how it is grotesque to define a class based solely on what it does, he would strip this proletariat of its other possibilities and confine the class to the role of either making the revolution happen or fulfilling material needs through hard labor. As Rancière clarifies:

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>233</sup> Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*.

<sup>234</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, 71.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 80.

So nothing could be more grotesque than imagining a class consciousness based on the virtue of the laborer. It is not "doing" that determines being but the opposite. The proletarian is someone who has only one thing to do - to make the revolution- and who cannot do that because of what he is. For what he is, is the pure loss of every attribute, the identity of being and nonbeing, which is not at all the empty identity of Hegel's Logic but an identity that has gone through the school of labor, i.e. through the opposition between nothing of the laborer and the everything of wealth.<sup>236</sup>

In the end, Marx's revolution is composed of men who have fully embedded themselves in the process of production and who have fought against their oppression through the invention of the machine. Rancière describes below Marx's pessimistic view that, workers are helpless amidst the arrival of machines in the factory and there is no resort for these workers who cannot be anything other than a laborer:

But Marx interprets progress differently. For him, the overcoming of the Platonic prohibition is neither the shoemaker-poet, nor industrial art, nor the mechanical toy. The future of bourgeois liberty and popular emancipation did not lie, in the days of Hans Sachs, with the flourishing industry of the free cities of the Empire. It began in England or the Netherlands in the purifying hell of the textile mills set up on the shores of the sea of exchange...It is not then by becoming a poet or industrial artist that the shoemaker escapes his curse, but by inventing the machine.<sup>237</sup>

Marx's image of the proletarian is a direct contradiction of the working class, which Rancière discovered in his archival work. Marx was neither interested in the rich reality of the proletarian life nor in what the proletarians desire for themselves. The proletarians whom Rancière discovered in *Logical Revolts* and the *Proletarian Nights* are far from Marx's proletarians who have nothing else to do but lose their chains in the revolution or lose their humanity as machines of labor. The archival work has shown Rancière individuals who have defied linear time and worked in the night to be something else such as women who write passionate letters to their lovers and men who insist

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 68.

on being philosophers, poets, and artists. These were the very people whom Marx was wary of inasmuch as he does not allow them to be anything other than their proletarian identity.

The central figure Rancière uses as a representation of the “poor” is the shoemaker poet who often ends up as an outcast because of his insistence to get away from his identity as a shoemaker. The shoemaker represents the proletarians in the archives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Rancière discovered. Among these workers, he often alludes to the example of the joiner Gauny. Gauny is the carpenter-joiner who in his letters to his fellow workers insists on being a philosopher. In reference to Gauny, Rancière writes, “One joiner, for example, offers the following excuse for failing to pursue his work: “If I catch sight of Socrates at a distance, I suddenly let my duties go to hell and run after him, so that we may discourse together (often for a whole day) about the true goods of existence.”<sup>238</sup>

Gauny’s example plays a major role in Rancière’s works as this joiner exemplifies equality in one’s capacity for thinking, which is the central point that Rancière accentuated in his writings after the break from Althusser. Moreover, Gauny also stands for what Rancière calls “moments of decisive justice,”<sup>239</sup> which according to him, Marx should have focused on in his writings about the proletarians. This argument also makes explicit that emancipation, for Rancière, is not necessarily collective emancipation that could be achieved through a mass revolution nor is based on a unified identification of a class. To be precise, emancipation happens in the triumph of subjects (individually or collectively) to go beyond their social identification and demonstrate their equal capacity for thinking by becoming more than what has only been deemed possible for them. In his criticism of Marx’s view of history, Rancière writes:

The history of production, then, must be cracked into two. On the one hand, there is the labor of generations, the accumulation of transformations, compost and grime. On the other hand, there is revolutionary justice that “gets rid of” (*beseitigt*) labor- a justice executed by a class that is no longer a class, not only to overthrow the ruling class but

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>239</sup> “In the history of production, then, one must recover the instance of decisive justice, not that of formative labor” Ibid., 78.

also to “succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.”<sup>240</sup>

Rancière, unlike Marx, decided to focus on the capacity of the proletarians to create a name for themselves that would not define them as a class. Rather than highlighting a dreadful history of the working class who are oppressed, sad, and miserable, Rancière allows individual characters from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century workers of France to remind us that there is not only one but numerous ways of emancipating oneself from the chains of the capitalist production. This attempt first begins with the recognition of one's capacity for thinking, therefore not allowing oneself to be defined by a single identification as a worker. The point is to disagree and to defy identification.

## **Disagreement**

Rancière's breakaway from Marx is even more pronounced in *Disagreement*, where he expounds on his mature view of politics. Here, Rancière undertakes an investigation of how major political philosophies have attempted to displace politics by always giving it a definition that serves to conceal its real essence as democratic (as the equal participation of literally anyone). I will hardly go into the details of the book in this discussion because I have already discussed it in Chapter 1. I will, however, highlight Rancière's engagement with Marx in the text to show the conditions through which his shift away from Marx takes place.

*Disagreement* tackles the various ways in which politics is suppressed by political philosophy. Rancière coined three neologisms to name the ways in which this is done: Archipolitics, Parapolitics, and Metapolitics. Each of these concepts is represented by a famous political philosopher, i.e., Plato for archipolitics, Aristotle for parapolitics, and Marx for metapolitics. Rancière identifies Marx's philosophy with metapolitics or the idea that politics is not located in politics itself but is always somewhere else, i.e., “beneath or behind it, in what it

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 79.

conceals and exists only to conceal.”<sup>241</sup> The following passage is a description of metapolitics in

*Disagreement:*

Metapolitics is the discourse on the falseness of politics that splits every political manifestation of dispute, in order to prove its ignorance of its own truth by marking, every time, the gap between names and things, the gap between enunciation of some logos of the people, of man or of the citizenry and the account that is made of this, the gap that reveals a fundamental injustice itself identical with a constitutive lie.<sup>242</sup>

Politics is a cover-up that is done to disregard the essence of real politics, namely, democracy. Rancière reconstructs Marx and discloses that for Marx, politics is a lie. This means that when Marx defined politics on the basis of society or the social, he focused on the meta-moments, the hidden conditions of politics that in fact would never allow for real politics as equality to happen. In the metapolitics of Marx, there is a wide gap between inequality, injustice, and exploitation –the conditions of politics beneath or behind it- and the democratic practice of politics that could possibly erase these conditions. Thus, what conditions politics is in fact at the same time what destroys it.<sup>243</sup>

This meaning of politics contradicts Marx’s self-declared concept of politics as universal emancipation. And if we follow the full argument of Marx on how society grounds politics, we can surmise that he does not honestly believe that the unity of all workers would lead to universal emancipation because in the first place politics for him is not real politics. Politics that pertains to human rights, universal emancipation and representation are in fact bourgeois concepts concealed as being universal. For Rancière:

Man’s emancipation is then the truth of free humanity outside the limits of political citizenship. But, along the way, this truth about man trades places. Man is not some future accomplishment beyond political representation: He is the truth hidden beneath this representation: man of civil society, the egotistical property owner

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translated by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 1999, 83.



matched by the non-property owner whose rights as a citizen are only there to mask radical nonright. The inability of citizenship to achieve man's true humanity becomes its capacity to serve, by masking them, the interests of man the property owner. Political participation is then just the mask of the allocation of lots. Politics is the lie about a reality that is called society.<sup>244</sup>

The contradiction within Marx's conception of politics has important consequences for the political subject. This means that Marx is an elitist thinker just like Althusserian Marxists, Marxist dogmatists and the French communists when he posited an inescapable fate for the worker who will always be dominated by the property owner. In the metapolitics of Marx, the subjects will always be mystified fools who are beguiled by the capitalist and the property owner. Marx's call to action for all workers is nothing but empty words that he did not expect to actualize.

As Rancière, continued to reconstruct Marxist theory in *Disagreement*, he encounters another contradiction in the work of Marx. Aside from the fact that politics is a lie for Marx, Rancière reveals an ambiguity in Marx's concept of class. When Marx theorized class, he was pertaining to two notion of class that contradict each other i.e., class as an economic concept and class as a political concept. The economic concept of class identifies people with an essence through their places in the labor force. For instance, the working class is in-charge of production and this capacity for production and labor is what distinguishes it from other classes. The political concept of class on the other hand dissolves all class because the proletariat is a class that will dissolve all classes. Rancière describes a contradiction that hides itself in these two concepts of class. The political concept of class in Marx is premised upon a social economic concept of class, which is contradictory to the political one, not just contradictory in terms of definition but in terms of what it does to politics. More importantly, in the foundation of the two concepts of class, one is more important in classical Marxism (Capital) that is the economic class that is a direct negation of the political concept of class. Rancière elucidates:

In the political sense, a class is something else entirely; an operator of conflict, a name for counting the uncounted, a mode of subjectivation superimposed on the

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

reality of all social groups...Now in between the two rigorously opposed kinds of class, Marxist metapolitics introduces an ambiguity in which all the philosophical disagreement is concentrated.<sup>245</sup>

Thus, the concept of class Marx operates with denies emancipation. Marx's metapolitics while feigning to aim for the emancipation of the working class from the conditions of oppression presses down a social identity to a group of individuals. This class identity then becomes the limits within which a class can operate. While Marx assigns the task of revolution to the proletariat, he insists on the rigidity of the material conditions that do not allow this class to go beyond what and who they are as an economic class.

Politics therefore cannot be found in visible political processes, which only ever reproduce the order of exploitation and submission. It can only be achieved through the struggle of classes in which one class has to prevail over another, thereby ending all exploitation. This specific task is entrusted by Marx to the proletarian class. The proletarian class of Marx, however, is entangled in an ambiguous role. On the one hand, it is the active "infrapolitical truth of the class struggle,"<sup>246</sup> that is, the active agent of politics responsible for emancipation, which is its goal; it is the active agency within politics that would allow politics to happen. On the other hand, politics is beyond its reach. Rancière describes in *Disagreement* this contradiction, which he found in Marx:

In one sense, the concept of class is accepted as the truth of the political lie. But this truth itself oscillates between two extreme poles. On the one hand, it has the positive force of a social content. The class struggle is the true movement of society, and the proletariat, or the working class, is the social force driving this movement to the point where its truth causes the illusion of politics to explode. Thus defined, the working class and the proletariat are positive social forces and their "truth" lends itself to supporting all ethical embodiments of the productive working people. But, at the other extreme, they are defined by their sole negativity as "nonclasses." They are mere performers of the revolutionary acts by which measure any form of democratic subjectivation, as well as any positive social grouping, seems radically deficient.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>246</sup> Bruno Bosteels, "Archipolitics, Parapolitics, Metapolitics," in Jacques Rancière Key Concepts, 90.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

Thus, in *Disagreement*, Rancière reiterates the same critique of Marx in *The Philosopher and His Poor*, which states that it is precisely by making the proletariat the only real political class (because it will end all oppression by ending exploitation<sup>248</sup>) that Marx, in fact, depoliticizes it because the actual proletariat and its real practices never fit with this role. In other words, by giving the proletariat a specific role and limiting its capacities to such a role, Marx renders politics out of reach. Politics, as democracy, which entails the equal capacity of political agents to participate, is impossible in Marx.

Apparently, Rancière rejects metapolitics and criticizes Marx's ambiguous characterization of the proletarian class. To explain his definition of politics, Rancière alludes to the theater and the theater actors as the political subjects. Whereas in Marx the proletarians are considered as the lie of politics, Rancière invests in his proletarian notion, the creative capacity of active agents whose political subjectivities could possibly be the key to achieving real politics, that is, real equality. It is worthwhile to quote a long passage from *Disagreement* here:

It is a matter of interpreting, in the theatrical sense of the word, the gap between a place where the *demos* exists and a place where it does not, where there are only populations, individuals, employers and employees, heads of households and spouses, and so on. Politics consists in interpreting this relationship which means first setting it up here as theater, inventing the argument, in the double logical and dramatic sense of the term, connecting the unconnected. This invention is neither the feat of the sovereign people and its 'representative' nor the feat of the nonpeople/ people of labor and their sudden "awareness"... In politics, subjects do not have consistent bodies; they are fluctuating performers who have their moments, places, occurrences, and peculiar role of inventing arguments and demonstrations –in the double logical and aesthetic, senses of the terms- to bring the nonrelationship into relationship and give place to nonplace.<sup>249</sup>

In the above quote, a direct critical reference to Marx's class politics is explicit, specifically when Rancière mentions the "nonpeople/people of labor." Politics is not created by a specific class with a fixed role and a fixed identity but rather in isolated and decisive moments by literally anyone

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 88-89

from the *demos*. It is not a moment “that is yet to come” after a grand plan has been established and everything has been staged. In fact, it is made possible by bodies of subjects who speak and act otherwise than their given identification, and through the process questioning the structures and orders in place and reintroducing alternative ways of speaking, doing, and being. Here, we find Rancière asserting the very same arguments from *Logical Revolts* until *The Philosopher and his Poor*. The proletarians are far from the miserable, helpless subjects that Marx and some Marxists have portrayed them to be. They are, in fact, in charge of a particular role, i.e., the “arguing of a wrong” or the declaration of the existence of equality through their speech by means of disagreement. The “arguing of a wrong,” or the act of disagreement consists of much more than speech, and this Rancière allows us to witness in *Proletarian Nights*.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Proletarian Life**

In the previous chapter, I reconstructed Rancière's gradual move away from Marx and how this shift contributes to the notion of the political subject in his work. In general, Rancière identifies a problem in Marx similar to what he found in Althusser, that is, the relationship between a theory of emancipation and the people who such a theory is supposed to emancipate. Rancière argues that while Marx explains emancipation through his class politics, the proletariat is reduced to merely two possibilities of either fulfilling the revolution or being trapped in the structure of production. This theoretical position does not consider what the workers want for themselves but instead reduces them to an abstract mechanism of a means to an end. In this case, the cycle of domination goes full circle in Marx because while the ultimate aim of Marxist philosophy is freedom from capitalist exploitation, the agents are not accounted for individually, as the proletarians are not allowed to speak for themselves. Marx's political philosophy is counterproductive and inconsistent to a project of political emancipation when it confines the people it is supposed to emancipate within limited possibilities.

Based on the abovementioned, Rancière identifies in Marx a fundamental methodological problem that translates into political practice. While Marxist discourse is relevant for a project of emancipation, it disregards the individual voices of the proletarians. Marx was not interested in the rich reality of the proletarian life; instead, he focused his analysis on its atrocious aspects i.e., exploitation and dispossession of labor brought about by the creation of machines at the advent of the Industrial Revolution. Marx's focus on a structural history of labor limits the possibilities of the proletarian worker. For Marx, the proletarian is not someone who can write poems, perform in the theater, form associations, and write journals.

Marx's treatment of the proletarian is no different from Althusser's as well as some historians, sociologists, psychologists, and any other social and political theorists. Several thinkers in these fields of study assume a position of knowledge and with it the authority to speak for or in

the name of the proletarian class. Rancière has pointed out that such a position of privileged speech is wrong because it becomes a source of domination. Here, we can surmise that Rancière was concerned with the problem of methodology as well as on how such methodology is applied to the study of proletarians. How should we talk about the people we wish to emancipate? Who are these people? Who is the subject of politics? From which and whose position is it right to speak such that emancipation could be possible? To answer these questions, Rancière focuses the limelight on the speech of the workers who left records of their experiences and struggles in 19<sup>th</sup> century France. *Proletarian Nights: The Workers Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* is the work where Rancière allocated most space to the words of the workers.

Notably, Rancière focused much of his energy in the archival work<sup>250</sup> not because he was interested in these workers as a sociologist (the famous science of his time). His main interest was on the question of emancipation and the proletarians who comprise the working class led revolution during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this period of his career, Rancière remains a Marxist who believes that the proletarian class is the class that would end all exploitation. As Rancière rummaged through the journals left behind by proletarians, he was astonished by the writings of individuals who despite being in toil, wrote texts employing the literary tropes used by famous bourgeois poets and writers of their time. Stumbling upon these writings of individuals who are classified in the lowest ranks of society had a profound effect on Rancière as a political thinker who in the next ten years would build his theory having these proletarians in mind.

*Proletarian Nights* also highlights the early beginnings of Rancière's key concepts, such as 'literarity,' 'dissensus,' 'politics as aesthetics,' 'equality of intelligence,' and the 'role of bodies in emancipation,' which he eventually developed in his mature works. From *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière drew out key concepts that contribute to his unique idea of politics and political subjectivity that is centered on the capacity of the subjects to think and speak for themselves.

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<sup>250</sup> Rancière spent almost a decade of his career (1970s-1980s) doing research into the archives of the French working class of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction against Marxist historians of labor.

## Proletarian Nights: Workers' Dream in 19th Century France

Who are the proletarians? And what can we learn from them? These two main questions guided Rancière's archival work in the 1980s. *Proletarian Nights* displays the "words" of the workers in France after the July 1830 revolt that overthrew Charles X and installed Louis-Philippe in a constitutional monarchy. Rancière aims to show that during the violent outbreaks of revolutions that overthrew one form of government in exchange of another, there were significant moments involving proletarians whose concern was not that of a bloody revolution; instead, these proletarians were preoccupied with their dreams of a life far different from their state of suffering and poverty. This capacity to recognize their circumstances and find the means to improve their situation draws an image of the proletarian that is different from the suffering proletarians of Marx who "have nothing to lose other than their chains in the revolution".<sup>251</sup> The point of the whole book is to present "the many faces" of the proletarians as evident in their own writings, journals, songs, poems, and exchanges, which are in contrast to the proletarian identity that has been imposed on them by various social sciences. Rancière's goal remains for the purpose of political philosophy and not sociology. He was interested with the proletarians for the general question of emancipation.

In this central part of the thesis, I will undertake a thorough analysis of this seminal text in Rancière's work. This is an important task for me to do because of several reasons. First, *Proletarian Nights* is where Rancière substantiates his methodological project that directly comes out from his critical polemic with his intellectual masters, Althusser and Marx, which I have outlined in the previous chapters. Therefore, the book serves as a foundational text for a number of Rancière's key concepts such as the equality of intelligence, the partition of the sensible, literarity, dissensus, as well as the famous argument that aesthetics is politics and politics is

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<sup>251</sup> This pertains to the famous Marxist declaration at the end of the Communist Manifesto, "Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working Men of All Countries, Unite!" Karl Marx, *Communist Manifesto*, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Selected Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1958).

aesthetics. These concepts I have listed, which are present in this early texts albeit not thematized explicitly, are the major ideas through which Rancière has made his mark in the intellectual field. The reason why I have focused on this early Rancière text is because the orthodox readings of Rancière often only highlight the discursive aspect of politics and political subjectivity without taking into consideration the early roots of this discursive notion of politics in the early writings of Rancière.

Second, the book explores in detail the actual words of the proletarians in Paris between 1830s-1850s, the period that witnessed a number of proletarian revolts in France, which in turn contributed to the birth of the republic that it is today. The work has a historical and documentary value because it shows the actual words of real people who lived during the successions of proletarian-led revolts in 19<sup>th</sup> century France. This significant documentation of the words of the workers captures the collective proletarian movements during their inception stage. From these words of the workers, we are given a glimpse at the raw, pure accounts of proletarian lives untainted by their Marxist organizers. In this sense, this documentation illustrates the actual moments of the birth of political subjects apart from the Marxist collective with which they are identified.

Furthermore, *Proletarian Nights* is Rancière's straightforward reconstruction of the life of proletarian subjects to show how those seemingly insignificant moments in individual proletarian lives became the impetus for numerous revolts against the 19<sup>th</sup> century French government. Through their accounts, we witness how the workers are far from the ignorant, stupid, and lazy masses that they are often deemed to be. In fact, in the book Rancière argues that there is an essential lesson than can be learned from individuals in terms of politics and how political subjects are formed. Rancière's rich account of proletarian lives complements his argument on politics as political subjectivation, and allows us to see several aspects of this subject. For one, he analyzes and emphasizes essential ideas and arguments to bring out political subjectivity.



Rancière's work is pitted against two significant images of proletarians with significant impact on how their political agency is conceptualized. The first one is an image of the working class that has no political agency because the difficulty of their life and work conditions takes away their intellectual capacities. Proletarians are deemed as cognitively and morally impaired which means that they can have no political agency and therefore they need to be led by an organized group.<sup>252</sup> On the other hand, there is also the Marxist proletarian who, suffering from capitalist exploitation, is called to the task of building the barricades of revolution in order to end his oppressed condition. These two images of the proletarian are focused on the incapacity of the workers to go beyond their negative reputation.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Rancière's investigation on workers' emancipation moved into the direction of the question of what can be learned from the proletarian political subjects of early 19<sup>th</sup> century France. This project was conducted by first finding the images of the working class that are contrary to what have been described above. This was done by showing how the workers during that time engaged in activities that were not expected of them. Rancière's move was a direct result of two events during his lifetime: the May 1968 revolt that eventually led him to the question of the status of theory; and his debate against Althusser, which inspired him to examine the question of political subjectivity in order to develop a different image of the dominated.

The beginning of the archival work could be traced from articles published in the journal *Révoltes Logique* (1975-1981) and was summarized through another piece that Rancière wrote as preface to his dissertation, "The Proletarian and his Double" (1981). In this article, he states his original intention of finding a working-class identity based on the premise that there is a gap

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<sup>252</sup> There is this fear of the illiterate and immoral masses in public discussion, in some political theory, and in social sciences. The immoral masses cannot be trusted in their judgment and even in their actions because they have the tendency to be dangerous and can follow dangerous leaders or become violent. For instance, Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution* supports this image of the proletarian masses when she argued that the French revolution as well grassroots movements are not the work of 'the People' but of individuals who were motivated by hunger and poverty. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

between the representation and the likes of the real working class. In the following passage, Rancière specifies the thesis of his work:

...that at the root form of identification and ‘typical’ discourse that underlie the idea of working-class emancipation, the idea of a class and its combat, there is a singular phenomenon of a production of meaning that is neither the consciousness of an avant-garde instructed by science nor the systematization of ideas born out of the practice of the masses; a pure product of the activity of a group but rather of a network of individuals who, by various paths, found themselves in a position of spokesman, at the same time central and outside the game: not people who carried the word of the masses, but just people who carried the word; individuals separated from their supposed fellows by what they had grasped, caught up in the circuit of a speech that came from elsewhere, and who were able to reconcile themselves in a common identity only by making themselves spokesmen in an opposite sense from that ordinarily understood: by taking speech *to the masses*.<sup>253</sup>

The proletarians, who are highlighted in this work, are those who defy a given proletarian identity described above. The workers are not defined with a collective, class, or organization to which they belong. Instead, they are defined by their individual struggles to demand recognition using the method of speech. One would notice how Rancière emphasized individuals in contrast to the masses. He points out that his main concerns are exemplary individuals who have taken speech and who have spoken for themselves as subjects, not as a collective. In search of a proletarian identity for the purpose of his bigger project of workers’ emancipation, it is not enough to rely on a generalized account of the working class. Rather, it is necessary to allow the workers to speak for themselves. What we find there, however, once we actually open the “archives of proletarian dreams” are words that are not only denunciations of their working conditions, or plans for insurrections but also several layers of proletarian expression. These words reveal the deeper aspects of their thoughts, emotions, desires, hopes, aspirations, and motivations. Rancière thus argues that if we want to understand the sources and channels of emancipation, which for him at the time is synonymous with worker emancipation, it is fundamental to take the dominated, the

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<sup>253</sup> Jacques Rancière, “The Proletarian and his Double” *Staging the People: The Proletarian and his Double compiled from articles originally appearing in Les Révoltes logiques 1975-1981* translated by David Fernbach (London/ New York: Verso, 2011). 28.

workers, at their own words. So, the workers' words would have to be treated not as objects to be exegetically diagnosed from a distance, but as sophisticated texts that demand the same attention as any other philosophical treatise. In *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière writes:

Looking at the mosaic of "fragments of private correspondence," "letters of a nephew to his uncle in the countryside," "indiscretions," "opinions," and invocations that make up *La Ruche populaire*, we may realize, perhaps, that there is more sophistication here than is ordinarily admitted. Behind the lithography of the illustrious Charlet, as under those paintings several times overlaid, we may find traces of many sketchy or corrected images, many landscapes glimpsed or dreamed of.<sup>254</sup>

Rancière consistently argues that in the words of the workers, we may be able to glimpse another world that is, on the one hand, full of painful suffering but, at the same time, full of dreams about a different life borne out of an understanding of the circumstances unique to them as workers. Rancière remains consistent with his position that the workers' speech is an active demand for participation in the political space where they exist. It serves as an exercise of the true meaning of democracy as the equality of participation by anyone from the *demos*. It likewise shows their demand for recognition, the assertion of freedom, and the claim of the exercise of equality. He demonstrates that through their words, the workers expressed affects such as anguish at the theft of their time, humiliation at having to beg for work, and misery at the experience of alienation from other workers. More than mere complaints, these workers also found a way to express through words their deep-seated emotions about their longing for a different life and where Rancière highlights the act of "dreaming" and "longing," which provided the necessary impetus for the workers' mobilization because they could imagine a different life. What made their gesture remarkable was the demonstration of the equality of intelligence. By borrowing the words of the bourgeois writers and by transforming their nights into days in order to read, discuss, and write, the workers defied the boundaries imposed on them by their identity. It is in these gestures of

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<sup>254</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, translated by John Drury (London/ New York: Verso, 2012), 9.

thinking and of speaking for themselves that they became the political subjects who mobilized to revolt against the government.

The task of Rancière is twofold. First, it involves questioning the position of the philosopher (from where does one speak?); and second, it considers allowing the workers to speak for themselves for them to reveal the answer to the question, who are the proletarians who rebelled and what can we learn from them? The object of the study therefore is ‘speech’ in order to disengage them from their class-imposed identity. Yet, Rancière also emphasized the feelings of longing, hopefulness, misery, and solidarity in these speeches of workers. As Rancière famously writes in *The Method of Equality*, his work is comprised of two steps: “Firstly to get back to the words that were the actual words exchanged, that were spoken in the workers’ struggles, the workers’ texts, the manifestos,... after that to disengage these workers’ words from any label identifying the real worker, the person who is justified in speaking, who expresses his class, his being, his ethos.”<sup>255</sup> In this sense, *Proletarian Nights* can be described as a project of deconstruction of the proletarian identity that has always been subjected to a proletarian metaphysics or the definition of a class based on preexisting standards. Rancière states that his project is not a scratching of the images of the workers in order to bring truth to the surface but a shoving aside of predominant workers’ identity “so that other figures may come together and decompose there.”<sup>256</sup> The workers’ speech reveals aspects of the proletarian life that have been neglected in the past such as their desires, boredom, and imagination. All of these contribute to the proletarian struggle for emancipation.

*Proletarian Nights* is Rancière’s transition to his mature thoughts on politics and the method of equality. As a central work, he often refers to these texts even in his late writings and

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<sup>255</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality*, translated by Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 23

<sup>256</sup> Rancière was describing the position that he assumes within the communist discourse. He described himself as being in the middle of two extremes, 1. being a Trotskyist vanguard communism led by the party and 2. The Maoist authenticity argument about being true to the people’s desire. Rancière finds that there is room for suspicion in these two approaches therefore there is a need to go back to the words of the workers themselves in order to see their original thoughts. Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 10.

interviews as if the words of the 19<sup>th</sup> century workers stand as proof of the proletarian capacity for thinking. Therefore, with regard to the question of political subjectivity in Rancière's work, *Proletarian Nights* is an important text because it does not merely define what political subjectivity is but, in fact, demonstrates it by allowing the proletarians to speak of their own experiences. In one of the passages from the book, Rancière labels his work as a kind of journeying with those proletarians who were going against the identity that had been imposed on them. By "these workers," he means:

... those worker dreamers, prattlers, versifiers, reasoners, and indulgers in sophistry whose notebooks serve as a replacement screen in the mirror of reality granted and appearance withheld and whose falsetto voice creates dissonance in the duet of mute truth and contrite illusion. Perverted proletarians whose discourse is made up of borrowed words. And one knows that these people, so highly praised for keeping an exact account of their dues and debts, almost always give back the borrowed words in a strangely made-up way, with a droll pronunciation of their own.<sup>257</sup>

What makes the proletarian project of emancipation remarkable is the method that consists of two most unusual acts. One is the engagement in seemingly useless activities such as dreaming, prattling, reasoning, and sophistry. The other is the act of borrowing words from an "other," which, in this case, are the bourgeois poets. Here, Rancière highlights another important theme in the book, that is, how the workers' encounter with the bourgeois allowed them to borrow the words of these people in order to put an expression into their miseries and desires.

This act of borrowing, i.e., translating the words of the bourgeois poets and writers into a language that allows them to speak of their experiences as workers, is the verification of the equality of intelligence that Rancière would discuss in his later works. Moreover, this act of borrowing also demonstrates that proletarians are lucid thinkers whose ideas emerged when they were pushed to the limits of their existence. They did not borrow ideas from the bourgeois but merely the latter's language; they were not hiding behind bourgeois thinkers but brought

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 15.

themselves forward through their own words. Such 'excess of words'<sup>258</sup>, which Rancière highlights by focusing on proletarian accounts of their lives, is the beginning of the concept of 'literarity' that he elaborates in *Disagreement* and in other later works. Literarity is the state of the social world, post revolution, where anyone has a right to access any language and in turn, this leads to the capacity of anyone to use speech to demonstrate the equality of intelligence. It backs up proletarian demand to use all languages including the most esoteric language of bourgeois literature, philosophy and science. The detailed discussion of this concept can be found in Chapters 1 and 6 of this thesis.

The subsequent discussion deals with the themes in *Proletarian Nights* that show how the affects of workers and their solitary moments of misery, intense thought, and imagined happiness, in fact, became the starting point of their political struggles. It is important to describe these moments in asserting the argument that revolutions are not borne out of abstract concepts but out of concrete miseries and dreams of embodied subjects who dared to imagine a different life, as they themselves were able to claim through their words. The discussion also demonstrates how the workers' demands and accounts of suffering and dreams, using borrowed words from bourgeois poets, are evidence of how concepts of literarity and equality of intelligence already exist in Rancière's early texts.

## **Proletarian Experience**

### **The Proletarian Demand**

The fundamental gesture is to apply a methodology that allows the subjects to speak in order to demonstrate their equal capacity for thinking, not one imposed from the outside or above

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<sup>258</sup> The statement by Rancière using this phrase says, "This "excess of words" that I call *literarity* disrupts the relation between an order of discourse and its social function. That is, *literarity* refers at once to the excess of words available in relation to the thing named; to that excess relating to the requirements for the production of life; and finally, to an excess of words vis-à-vis the modes of communication that function to legitimate "the proper" itself." See Davide Panagia and Jacques Rancière "Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière." *Diacritics* 30, no.2, (2000), 115. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1566474> (accessed June 2016).

the proletarian discourse. What does the proletarian say when he speaks of himself, about himself, or indeed herself? Rancière explains that in the archives of the workers, the proletarian demand remains the same every time they speak—the demand to be recognized as human. When the proletarian speaks, it is always an assertion of himself as a “human being” capable of thinking and of speaking in coherent ways as a result. Let us recall that in *Althusser's Lesson*, Rancière first mentioned the demand of the workers to be treated as “man” as demonstrated by the Lip factory workers when they declared that they would create their own production. In direct opposition to Althusser's influential anti-humanist stance, Rancière argues:

Man is not the mask that derails the struggle, but the rallying call that effects the transitions from labour practices that grant control over the labour process to the appropriation of the means of production – the passage from labour *independence* to the *autonomy* of the producers. The new chain that is initiated here leads straight to our present: Lip 1973: workers are not people one can separate and displace however one pleases. A weapon to remember this by: ‘It is possible: we produce, we sell, we pay ourselves.’ A future is outlined there: an economy that serves man’.<sup>259</sup>

The assertion of the Lip factory workers sums up the workers' view of themselves. They are men and women who are capable of standing up for themselves and thus demand to be recognized as such. The same claim echoes in the various chapters of *Proletarian Nights* where Rancière demonstrates how proletarian individuals speak about their origins, their views on work, their feelings while in the workshop and the other world they dream of.

Rancière claims that speech is recognized as a powerful medium for the assertion of one's capacity for thought. He uses speech in order to make workers' dreams evident. The same speech captures their suffering and emotions and reveals their thinking. The speech acts of the political subjectivity disrupt oppressive social structures through words. Hence, political subjectivity is formed out of a demand for equality through enunciation of speech acts and, at the same time, a

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<sup>259</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, translated by Emiliano Battista, (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 90.

performative demonstration of equality through visible gestures of the subject, which may often include the body.

In the several pages of *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière explains how the workers often resist the label of being lazy and indulgent in the banal pleasures of life. They are always contrasted with the bourgeois who are well mannered, well dressed, and dedicated to the pursuit of economic improvement. The workers are often deemed as barbarians who are not given the chance to say what they want to say or to be heard. However, if one goes into the several words of the workers Rancière encountered, the opposite is true. In *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière mentions the demand for equal treatment similar to the Lip factory workers:

The striking worker tailors echo the affirmation of solidarity and the proposal for parity in the two demands embodied in the third point of the program espoused by the Paris strikers of 1833: “relations of independence and equality with the masters.” Three specific demands are covered in the general formula: the right to smoke tobacco, some time to read newspapers, and the requirement that masters take off their hats upon entering the workshop. That may be the source behind the 1848 shibboleth: “Off with your hat before my cap!”<sup>260</sup>

Smoking tobacco, reading newspapers, taking off hats, what are all these but bodily movements, which seem like mundane gestures? Yet the workers’ demand to share the same privileges with their masters transforms these simple moments into a political question. Several assumptions can be derived from the discussion of these proletarian demands. Obviously, the workers can think. They already have recognition of themselves as human beings, and this belief pushes them to demand for equal treatment with their employers. The encounter with their bourgeois masters plays a crucial role in this self-recognition because it provides the model of how the workers think they should be treated. In a similar vein, this self-recognition also provides the language and the gestures to enunciate their demand (i.e., that they should be allowed to enjoy the same pleasure that their bourgeois masters enjoy, that they should be given time to develop their capacities, and that their equality with their masters should be visible in gestures of deferral).

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<sup>260</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 41.



Fundamentally, this encounter is the beginning of politics as well as the process of political subjectivation where through speech, the worker claims the right to participate in politics and more importantly, criticize the structure and hierarchy in place by situating themselves in spaces they are not expected to occupy.

The emphasis on the proletarian demands is one of Rancière's important contributions to the literature of emancipation that often focuses on the grand narratives and the famous names of history. By shifting the limelight to the obscure accounts of proletarians, Rancière brings the discourse to a new level that allows the confrontation between established methods of existing social sciences and the accounts of intimate lives of proletarians that reveal their thoughts. This encounter, which is full of proletarian words, allows the revelation of the richness of proletarian lives—their trials, sufferings, dreams, friendships, and families. More importantly, the expressions of their demands are concrete evidence of the proletarians' capacity to take charge of their own emancipation. To illustrate how this was true in the lives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century workers in France, the next sections include discussions of concrete workers' experiences in Rancière's *Proletarian Nights*.

### ***Negative Proletarian Experience***

Poverty plagues the lives of the proletarians to the point that they could not even choose their own fatigue.<sup>261</sup> This is a fact attested in numerous pages of *Proletarian Nights* that reveal the depth of the experiences of the workers as they struggled to live amidst the difficult periods of the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial France. In his account of proletarian lives, Rancière reveals the two kinds of suffering that beleaguered the workers and made their lives hardly bearable. The first kind is borne out of material poverty. The difficulty springs from the fact that there are not enough

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<sup>261</sup> This quote is in reference to the description on Gilland of his dream to be a painter and of his previous pastoral life in the country. "I would have liked to have been a painter. But poverty enjoys no privileges, not even that of choosing this or that fatigue for a living." J.-P. Gilland, "Les aventures du petit Guillaume du Mont-Cel," in *Les conteurs ouvriers*, quoted in Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 8.

economic means to sustain their basic needs. While labor is an absolute necessity, there was scarcity in labor because of the economic depression that France experienced that time. Thus, the workers' earnings were inadequate to sustain themselves and their families. Often, this resulted in living in the worst possible conditions such as residing in dilapidated apartments, limiting meals, getting multiple jobs, dying from sickness, and even taking one's life to escape the pain of poverty.<sup>262</sup>

The second kind of suffering is "existential" that results from material poverty. In this case, one's choice in life is limited to the means for survival. The worker is trapped in the life of a laborer while still aware of the possibility of another life. This kind of suffering results from the restriction of one's creative capacity to a specific kind of labor, e.g., woodwork for the carpenter or metalwork for the locksmith. Some are even less fortunate for having no fixed employment, thus relying on luck and happenstance, "a day-laborer in a factory, a correspondence clerk, a dealer in knickknacks, or an actor in little theaters."<sup>263</sup> In this kind of suffering, the worker goes through a tortuous experience of engaging in hard labor in order to live but at the same time longing for a life that is more free.

Having been through a number of political revolutions in the years between 1830-1848, France went through economic depression. The workers were the ones who suffered mostly because of the political, social, and economic crises of the time. There was massive unemployment, depressed wages, and the beginning of an extensive deskilling of workers because of the introduction of machines in factories. This is the context where the proletarians, whose journals Rancière delved into, wrote about their sufferings and dreams. As Rancière immersed himself in the writings left behind by the workers during that time, he realized how the dismal

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<sup>262</sup> There are numerous accounts of different ways in which proletarians succumbed to death brought about by exhaustion and those who took their lives. Some detailed accounts could be found in the chapter on "Of Circuit Rounds and Spirals." Ibid., 73.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 154.

situation affected several workers. For instance, he describes the struggle of a worker named Cailloux:

“Lying on his straw, often without sheets or food,” he has vainly sought any sort of employment within his capacity; and he now sells in the marketplace knick knacks that bring him fifteen to twenty sous per day. Stripped of everything, no longer able to borrow without hope of paying back, Cailloux spends most of his days without nourishment, except perhaps a pound or a half-pound of bread for himself and his wife, who must watch over the display and is thus prevented from going out to look for work...<sup>264</sup>

The life of a worker is one that drives him into exhaustion. At an early age, he is forced to leave behind his childhood and enter the workshop where he is subjected to long hours of work yet compensated with insufficient wages. Eventually, he feels weary of his life as exhaustion envelops his being and takes away even the memory of a happy childhood. To this worker, life is defined by poverty:

When the time came that I found myself, at the corner of every crossroad and the threshold of every thoroughfare, a young man already weary of real life and trying to summon up again the illusions of a happy childhood to make of them a pillow on which I might dream, if not sleep, during my long nights of insomnia, and every time found myself anticipated by the filthy and insatiable Harpy called Poverty, the specter that I kept fleeing everywhere and always and that kept pursuing me everywhere and always, I was forced to keep going straight ahead and farther until it had lost my track.<sup>265</sup>

The lack of material resources also thrusts the worker into a myriad of emotions, ranging from anger to helplessness and exhaustion. Yet it is remarkable how this proletarian who was starving to death expressed his suffering using a strikingly poetic language borrowed from the bourgeois laureates of French Romanticism. These accounts are what Rancière highlighted when he referred to the archives of the working class in order to make a political point; that if these workers can think and speak using the highest language of the bourgeois writers to describe their horrible life, then we have to change our political theory which is premised upon the idea that workers are ideologically mystified or barbarians and therefore need to be led by emancipators.

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>265</sup> Supernant, “Révélaitons d’un Coeur malade,” *La Ruche populaire*, 23, quoted in Ibid., 70.

Rancière shows us in his archival work that proletarians can think for themselves, that they are not cognitively impaired and they are certainly not barbarians. In fact, it is from these laborers that thinkers learn what to theorize. This view that political subjects are not mystified is exactly the reason why I am using Rancière for my problem on political subjectivity.

Rancière's most famous example of how workers express their wretched life using the highest language, which at that time was only meant for the upper class, is the joiner Gauny. Gauny's journals give a detailed account of his life as a worker and the totality of sensations that he felt as he was forced into the work of a joiner. He feels suffocation in the workplace that is supposed to be his saving grace. Gauny writes, "The worst of all my ills as a worker is the brutalizing nature of the work. It suffocates me."<sup>266</sup>

With lack of choice in terms of the material condition of his life, Gauny's words reflect his anger<sup>267</sup> and frustration. The emotions are so strong that it is manifested in his body:

When I became an adolescent, circumstances plunged me into a world turned upside down. Tormented by the convulsion, my heart was seized with regular fits of rage.... I came to know vengeance as I underwent the miseries and humiliations of a monotonous novitiate. I was in revolt. My flesh trembled, my eyes were wild. I was ferocious.<sup>268</sup>

Gauny perfectly exemplifies how the highest tropes of French Romantic poetry are used by a worker to document the horrors of his everyday oppression and this is exactly what Rancière is trying to show performatively through his archival work by exposing those amazing texts of the workers which have been forgotten. By focusing on the writings of the working class, Rancière hopes to present what real democracy is. Real democracy forbids the people from accessing the language of the 'elite', take this language for themselves to describe their circumstances and bring

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<sup>266</sup> Gauny to Retouret, Feb. 2, 1834, Fonds Gauny, Ms. 165; in Rancière (ed.), *Le philosophe plébéien*, p. 166," quoted in *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>267</sup> "Anger hatches in his glance. As he bounds along like a rebel slave, one would think he was hastening to sign a pact to wipe out his oppressor." Gauny, "Le travail à la journée," quoted in *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>268</sup> Gauny to Retouret, July 24, 1832, Fonds Gauny, Ms. 165; in Rancière (ed.), *Le philosophe plébéien*, p. 162." quoted in *Ibid.*, 52.

the language down to the horrors of their life. What could be a more concrete way of challenging hierarchies and organized structures than by disrupting its foundational beliefs and exposing the fact that circumstances could be different because the foundations are built on sand.

As if it is not enough to suffer on one's own, the negative experiences of the worker are handed down to the neophyte workers who are initiated into the order of work in a violent manner. At the same time, the old disillusioned worker is forced to teach the young ones whom he knows would displace him the moment he is no longer capable of work or when the term of his employment ends. In this apprenticeship, they regard each other with disdain. The young ones are forced to abandon their dreams and pay for the price in advance for displacing the old ones.<sup>269</sup> The words of locksmith J.-P. Gilland describes this process of violent apprenticeship:

In winter you forbid him to approach the fire on the pretext that he is trying to amuse himself around it. When he picks up the hammer and smashes his fingers with his first blow from a numb and unsure hand, you do not feel sorry for him, you laugh. Instead of helping him, you make fun of him. You must pick up the hammer with two hands, suggests one worker. He was looking in the air, says another. Pay no attention to him, says a third, he did it deliberately so that he wouldn't have to do anything today.<sup>270</sup>

The anger, violence, disdain, and frustration escalate to the soul of the worker who clamors for freedom from the difficult conditions of the body. The exhaustion does not end in the body, as nothing could be more painful than that pain of being trapped in a life that is not of one's choosing, that pain of having to live a life while having the capacity to dream of another. Rancière argues that "Pain is brought about by the curbing of one's freedom to think. It is not the rebelliousness of the exploited worker but the anger of a thought surrendered that will curb bodily movement by asserting its own rights."<sup>271</sup> This insight can be gleaned from the words of locksmith J.-P. Gilland:

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<sup>269</sup> Rancière. *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>270</sup> J.-P. Gilland, "De l'apprentissage: Fragment d'une correspondance intime," *La Ruche populaire*, "Sept. 1841, pp. 4-5." quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

...I would have liked to have been a painter. Delivering my messages, I could not help but stop and go into ecstasy before the shops with pictures and engravings. You cannot imagine how many blows Gérard, Gros, Bellangé, and Horace Vernet have cost me.<sup>272</sup>

Gilland is forced to work a job that literally kills him but when he goes past the shop where the paintings of these recognized French painters at that time are displayed; his heart is filled with longing for a profession deemed unimaginable for him as a worker. Gilland's desire to be a painter defies the common conception about workers as ignorant and his words clearly tells us of that longing. This capacity to imagine, to think of oneself as an equal to the artists and poets of the period is a display of the equality of intelligence and a practice of real democracy. Rancière is telling us that the best way to contest inequality and in fact practice democracy is by claiming a language, which is not meant for a particular class. Already, Gilland was acting as if he was on the same level as those painters in a society where even appreciation of the arts is unimaginable for working class.

The physical exhaustion in the workshop stands nothing in comparison to having dreams of another life, the other life one dreams as a child that eventually one has to give up. For instance, Gauny and Jeanne Deroin both encountered the love for learning at a very young age, but then had to give up their respective dreams because of the need to work. Dreaming of putting up a library for the children of proletarians like him, Gauny recalls the moment he realized that what he wanted to do might never translate into reality:

It was agreed that my mother would save for me the sacks holding the nourishing grains that she bought. How great was my enthusiasm that evening back home as I explored those treasures of fragmentary discourse and annal remnants. How irritated and impatient I was when I got to the torn end of a page and could not pursue the narration. There was no follow-up to the first delivery of sacks and wrappings, even though she was urged to buy all her lentils from the same merchant.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> J.-P. Gilland, *Les conteurs ouvriers*, Paris, 1849, p. xii. quoted in *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>273</sup> Gabriel to Louis, Fonds Gauny, Ms. 112. See Rancière (ed.), *Le philosophe plébéien*, p. 28, n. 1." quoted in *Ibid.*, 50.

Here, one perceives the enthusiasm for learning of the young curtailed by the harsh reality or poverty. The vitality of a proletarian child was forced to withdraw from a future of possibilities because of his life conditions. The same rings true for the young Jeanne Deroin who may not have thought of her future as a seamstress and lingerie maker as she enjoyed her books that she deemed as her “treasures of learning.”

I was never familiar with the joys of infancy or the games of early childhood. From the time I learned to read, reading became my sole occupation and the charm of my every moment. I felt a vague desire to experience and know everything. God and religion had aroused my attention most of all, but the mobility of my ideas kept me from focusing my attention on one object for a long time. Weary of searching without understanding, I compared and related. Still too young to appreciate my social position, I was happy. The future seemed bright and gracious. I saw myself rich with the treasures of learning.<sup>274</sup>

In contrast to these feeble dreams, the reality of a worker’s life, according to Gauny, is a hell without poetry:

There are misfortunes so noble and so well sung that they glitter in the sky of the imagination like apocalyptic stars, their glow causing us to forget our mean sorrows, which, lost in the gullies of this world, seem to be no more than deceptive specks. Childe Harold, Obermann, René, confess to us the fragrance of your agonies. Answer. Were you not happy in your glorious fits of melancholy? For we know that they crown your souls like haloes with the genius of your lamentations and the amplitude of their radiation. Your celebrated pains have their own mysterious recompense, which again corroborates the futility of complaints. Sublime unfortunates! You did not know the sorrow of sorrows, the vulgar sorrow of the lion caught in a trap, of the commoner subjected to horrible sessions in the workshop, the penitentiary expedient gnawing away at spirit and body with boredom and the folly of long labor. Ah, Dante, you old devil, you never traveled to the real hell, the hell without poetry! Adieu!<sup>275</sup>

In this imagined dialogue with heroes of the great poets and novelists, Gauny imagines and conducts himself as if he was among his peers. He uses the same poetic language of these romantic poets and pretends to be having a conversation with where he was in fact telling them of what they

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<sup>274</sup> Jeanne Deroin, Profession of faith, Fonds Enfantin, Ms. 7608. quoted in Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Louis Gabriel Gauny, “Opinions,” *La Ruche populaire*, April 1841; in Rancière (ed.), *Le philosophe plébéen*, p. 37.” quoted in Ibid., 17.

have failed to understand about the horrors of a proletarian's life. True sufferings for Gauny lies in the lack of time to do poetry; such is a suffering that tortures his soul. "Now our chagrin has reached its peak because it is a reasoned and considered thing."<sup>276</sup> The moment the worker contemplates the life he had to give up in exchange of the dreary hours in the workshop, the pain confronts him even more. A detailed hourly description of a day in the life of a joiner in his workshop relays the message that the suffering proletarian has a full understanding of his experiences as he goes through the "hell" of the workshop. In this account, the feeling of revulsion does not arise from a sudden understanding of the logic of exploitation. The worker very well knows that he is in a system that is designed to exploit, dominate, and oppress him to a life of weariness, and yet his struggle goes deeper than all of these. His struggle is in the anticipation of the world outside the workshop; he is cognizant that he is trapped in the cycle of work and cannot engage in a world of art and learning. Gauny, who is fond of referring to himself in the third person in his journal, writes:

Everything within him yearns to escape from him and head out for some unknown that is desired as happiness and good fortune. Evening falls, and his soul wears itself out counting the minutes...This coming winter, if he does not work, his children will wake up to ask him for food. If he finds a bit of work in that hard season, he can already anticipate his apprehensiveness about the odious evenings before bedtime. His soul obstinately fixed on the pleasures of study, will want to abstract itself from industrial preoccupations and devote the night to the pleasure of learning and the charm of producing. It will be in despair if fate refuses it the exercise of this indefeasible right.<sup>277</sup>

And the proletarian who simply accepts his bondage falls into "despair." Left with no choice but to earn his keep in order to sustain his and his family's existence, he works himself to exhaustion and anticipates the end of a working day only to be hurled back again to the same prison of work the following day.

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>277</sup> Gauny *Le Travail à la journée* in Rancière (ed.), *Le philosophe plébéien*, p 43 quoted in Ibid., 66-67.



One may probably ask, “Why does Rancière devote such amount of time in highlighting these lamentable plights of the workers? It is precisely because these experiences are often taken lightly by those who organize the proletarians into collectives and by those intellectuals who claim to know more about the workers. These expressions of suffering are easily dismissed as “noise” and the cry of pain of animals that have no rational understanding of themselves. Rancière, however, thinks otherwise, for he would take these narratives of misery as expressions of equality of intelligence. For Rancière, the identification of the “wrong” and of the condition of their own oppression coming from the workers themselves is an exercise of intelligence that is equal to the intellectuals. The emotions felt by the workers during their miserable isolation in the workshops are moments of confrontation with themselves that allowed them to clarify their relationship to themselves, to their work, to their masters, and to the society in general. Furthermore, if the workers could enunciate their pain on their own, they cease to be caught up in the trap of representation by those who claim to be knowledgeable about the true conditions of the proletarian life. Through the workers’ own account of the misery they endure, their suffering becomes even more concrete, more explicit, and more real, thus difficult to ignore. The moment the worker makes the choice to speak about the nothingness where they come from, the position of being nobody, then they begin the process of political subjectivation.

Rancière, however, does not dwell on these negative proletarian experiences. In *Proletarian Nights*, some workers who straightforwardly described their suffering are the same people who would defy the linear order of time and transform their nights into days in order to engage in “useless” activities that their soul longs for, e.g., write poems and journals, write letters to their fellow workers, argue with each other, insist to philosophize and form associations to support each other. Through these activities, one can view that the same suffering of the soul could in fact be the same impetus that motivates the suffering worker into an exodus toward emancipation. However, this path to emancipation is not straight but a spiral-dizzying path. From misery, the proletarian does not jump straight into freedom. While negative proletarian experience

allows the worker to perceive his own domination, he continues to journey into alternate moments of pain, misery, and joy before he becomes a fully emancipated subject. In the next section, I will discuss the fleeting moments of happiness, which give the proletarian a preview of the possibility of a life that is free from suffering.

### ***Positive Proletarian Experience***

In the previous section, negative proletarian experience was discussed. Any account about workers can easily be stuck in this narrative of the miserable proletarian life. However, in a project about workers' emancipation generally based on the words of the political subjects, we are also given materials that show the opposite of proletarian suffering. Workers' words reveal that they did not wallow in their misery that they were able to think of the possibility of a different life, and that they, in fact, found happiness in their encounters with other proletarians.

What comprises positive proletarian experience? If it is the lack of material sustenance that makes his life unbearable, then the obvious answer to the question is the alleviation of the worker from poverty. Happiness must be derived from being able to eat, sleep, and enjoy the leisure of life. The problem, however, is that the richness of proletarian experience goes beyond the satisfaction of basic material needs. The worker is not a mere beast whose requirement in life is survival. He is a human being seeking to be recognized as "man" and therefore dreams to be treated as such. The condition of proletarian life could be easily described as "suffering," for he is not accorded the circumstance to achieve the fulfillment of what he desires. This is evident in Rancière's account of workers who, at a young age, had to give up their youth along with their dreams in order to immerse themselves in a life of work. In work, they find new 'homes' that they eventually detest so much because of the exhaustion they have to endure in order to live. The workers are alienated from their fellow workers, from their masters, and from the life they wish to live.

Despite the claim that *Proletarian Nights* is not a pessimistic book, it is easier to judge that the opposite is the case. The heart-wrenching accounts in writings left behind by workers about their unfulfilled hopes and their struggles make it difficult to relate stories of positive proletarian experiences. It seems that the happiness of proletarians only take place in relation to childhood memories and the hope for a better future. We can find in the book several moments of happy flights, a sudden feeling of solidarity with fellow workers, memories of love with a fellow militant, and a longing for family. Because of the random and fleeting character of these “happy” proletarian moments, I will proceed by first discussing the reveries of the worker inside the workshop, then to the experiences of solidarity with their fellow workers as they formed themselves into workers’ associations. This movement that begins from a solitary moment in the workshop to the encounter with fellow workers in workers’ commune is crucial to the process through which the proletarian becomes a political subject. First, the worker becomes aware of himself through a process of reflection and self-confrontation in the workshop; then he or she forms bonds of solidarity with fellow workers until they speak and demand for their rights to a better life.

### *Clouds of Reverie*<sup>278</sup>

Perhaps owing to the difficulty of his situation, the desire of a worker is to seek a way out of the oppressive conditions of his existence. A positive proletarian existence could be drawn from a careful attention to a worker’s account of his dreary condition in the workshop and the instances where he attempts to escape from his pain by dreaming and imagining a different and happier state. Rancière demonstrates that for a worker whose toil is designed to drive him to exhaustion, happiness comes in the form of momentary escape from the tedious constraints of the workshop. Such moments of reveries about a different life awakens in the imagination of workers—the idea

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<sup>278</sup> This phrase is taken from Désirée Véret’s letter to Victor Considérant wherein she mentions how she coped with the difficulties of a worker’s life through “clouds of reverie.” Désirée Véret to Victor Considérant, May 5, 1890, Archives nationales (A.N.), 10 As 42” July 1891. quoted in *Ibid.*, 429.

of a world different from the one they have to endure. This act of dreaming and imagining otherwise of what they experience was one of the methods by which the proletarians shifted the boundaries brought about by their oppression. Dreaming was also one of the sites of their happy experiences and the beginning of the process of subjectivation.

Nothing best describes this attempt of a flight from the reality of suffering than Gauny's hour-by-hour description of his working day. In his accounts, Gauny narrates moments of reverie, imagined freedom, and the joy of the worker at imagining the product of his work to be his own. Gauny's journal is the only existing first-person philosophical account of what it means to be a worker in 19<sup>th</sup> century France. In his journals, Gauny takes the reader into the dizzying experience of his attempts to fight the miserable experience of a worker by means of his imagination.

Gauny hauls his body out of bed at 5:00 a.m. to be at the workshop door at 6:00 a.m. As he journeys to his work place, he anticipates the fatigue of his body, he feels a combination of impatience and dismay thinking of the long hours of "work that loom ahead to devour his soul and stuff his mouth with their meager gain."<sup>279</sup> On the one hand, he understands the necessity of doing his craft that feeds the hunger of his stomach. At the same time, he is aware that what he gains at the end of the day is not enough to compensate for the hours lost in work. Nevertheless, the joiner immerses himself in work and allows his body to take over his mind as some sort of force of habit. "He forgets his surroundings. His arms work, some craft detail is done pleasingly, and he keeps going. An hour slips by."<sup>280</sup> During his moments of intense work, his mind does not stop to conjure thousands of thoughts.

The first hour allows us to have a glimpse of the worker's first instance of rebellion. He rebels against work by fully engaging himself in the performance of his tasks despite the full recognition that he is at a position of disadvantage. This recognition of his condition is the initial

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<sup>279</sup> Louis Gabriel Gauny, "Le travail à la journée," Fonds Gauny, Ms. 126. This text was published in extract form in *Le Tocsin des travailleurs*, June 16, 1848, 39." quoted in *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 61

step towards his emancipation. From Gauny's refusal to leave his work, we see that it is important for the worker to keep himself fully engaged in labor in order to imagine the opposite of what he is suffering from. Emancipation is not an abstract project that takes place in the realm of principles, but it traces its deep roots to the bodily experience of the proletarian. Gauny never went to school, and nobody explained oppression to him but he knows that he is oppressed. Nobody told him to hate his situation; he hates his situation in and by himself. His emotions are raw and borne out of his own musings.

In this workshop, he encounters several adversaries aside from himself, his boredom, and frustration. There is the master who always brings him out of his reverie. Gauny describes this enemy as having "a noisy footstep tearing the soul away from its dream of the promised land" and "the spoilsport who rules out peaceful dreaming about the enjoyments of good organization where it has no place."<sup>281</sup> Aside from the master, there is also Gauny's fellow worker who barely responds to him and the other workers waiting for him to lose his job. "For at the door of the workshop, workers are waiting for a position to become vacant. This surplus of common people in civilization puts them at the mercy of the one who sacrifices workers to work."<sup>282</sup>

The joiner could not be more poetic in his description of his perceived enemies. In most instances, even learned men are incapable of such poetic descriptions. Likewise, in these words, we are able to grasp how Gauny regards himself in relation to his work. The worker is a duality of body and soul. He is aware that only the body could be subjected to labor in the workshop, but his soul remains free to wander wherever it desires. The worker's perception of himself as a duality shows us that amidst the miserable condition of work, the proletarian is able to hold on to his soul as the carrier of his being. This soul fundamentally longs for two things. First is freedom—if the body is already enslaved, the soul could be spared and remain free to live a different life. Second,

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

he also longs for communion with other souls whether in the form of the master or the other workers.

This hour of deliberate forgetfulness takes its first form in the worker's intoxication with his work. "For a moment he manages to distance himself from the resentful feelings of his implacable memory. He works furiously. A living machine, he gains for the profit of his proprietor what he loses at the expense of his own strength."<sup>283</sup> Immersing himself at work as a form of rebellion, he imagines himself as a machine who will keep on working to deliver the results expected by his master. He will continue to do this until his bodily strength allows. At one point, he begins to hum a song: "Sometimes, in an untimely fit of gaiety, he hums an old beloved air that his father sang. Gradually going astray in the caprices of the sounds, which pervert his first memory, the measure of his joy undergoes a bizarre change. He is murmuring a song of rebellion that simulates a fusillade."<sup>284</sup> When the time to stop arrives in the guise of mealtime, he finds solace in eating alone. He finds a brief escape back to his own body while eating and being reminded that he is, after all, not a machine but an embodied human being. "He eats hurriedly to be his own man for a little while, to wander for twenty minutes in the depths of some vague hope. But his attentive ear remains on the alert, nevertheless, because the bell will soon sound; and its sound importunes him in advance by arousing dangerous comparisons with those who live off the work of others."<sup>285</sup> Briefly, he will escape again by imagining that he has no master and that he owns his time. Alas! It comes to a point where he imagines himself doing a good job, hence the need to affirm his little success. For this, he will rely on himself alone because his circumstance as a worker severs his ties with other workers. "He applauds himself over his success and would like to share with his fellow worker the good technique he figured out and used. However, the

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<sup>283</sup> Gauny quoted by Rancière in *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>284</sup> Gauny quoted by Rancière in *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>285</sup> Gauny, quoted by Rancière in *Ibid.*, 62.

other worker, less rebellious or more desperately in need, responds only furtively. For he notices the hated eye of the master, who is constantly on the lookout as he prowls among his workers.”<sup>286</sup>

What are these instances but concrete accounts of alienation written by a worker himself? As Gauny takes us to the little unknown moments in the workshop by giving us access to his thoughts, he also provides a narrative of how real the experience of alienation is to the individual, embodied worker. Alienation is neither simply some abstract concept brought about by the laws of production nor is it the ideology of mystified subjects. It is experienced by the worker whose suffering encompasses the body and the soul.

More importantly, these accounts also demonstrate a fundamental truth about workers’ emancipation, i.e., imagination and dreaming are moments where a worker defies time and escapes from the chains of work. Emancipation is an act of displacement where the proletarian moves away from the bleak reality of the workshop and opens himself to a hopeful possibility of freedom. Such an act of imagining and dreaming provides the individual with a respite from the suffocating conditions of the workshop. Where the workshop is designed to confine the body of the proletarian and offer no other option than to work, the worker’s mind wanders away as he imagines open and wide spaces away from the choking walls of the factory.

As the hours in the workshop pass by, Gauny’s thoughts begin to trail to some unknown land. Then he starts dreaming of a different world. He turns to the high windows of his workplace that offer no view of freedom, except that of flying birds and fluttering leaves in the distant trees. The image of a free animal that embodies carefree forgetfulness annihilates the sorrow of the worker and offers the escape that he longs for. Rancière writes an excerpt from Gauny’s journal in *Proletarian Nights*:

Above the nearby roofs the joiner glimpses the top of a poplar tree balancing in the air. He covets the vegetative existence of the tree and would gladly bury himself in its bark to avoid further suffering. A few ravens are just passing. He dreams of the vast perspective which they command and of which he is deprived. He sees the beautiful countryside toward which they are flying. In his delirium he envies those

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<sup>286</sup> Gauny, quoted by Rancière in *Ibid*, 63.

free birds living by the laws of God and would like to descend from human being to animal.<sup>287</sup>

For Rancière, Gauny's example demonstrates how hyper-individualized moments can serve as the impetus for politics and political subjectivity. In the process of political subjectivation, first, the subject sees and acknowledges, through his individual misery, the condition of his oppression. Rancière argues that the idea of the "other world" sharpens the proletarian's awareness of his sufferings. What follows is the recognition of the capacity to do, to shift boundaries, to defy limits, and to go against the established conditions of existence or what Rancière would later call the *partition of the sensible*. Dreaming, which is a seemingly useless practice, can actually be the beginning of how political subjects learn to speak about a different existence, whether it is the metaphor of a bird or the vegetative life of a tree, as long as, these images are representations of freedom. It is precisely in this useless activity that the subject becomes political because of his refusal to be trapped in his oppressed condition and his choice to entertain another idea of existence. The concrete act of dreaming is a subversion of the working hours and of the space of the workshop, which represent institutional time and structured space that is designed as the prison of the working political subject. The process of political subjectivation first involves the self and the capacity to dream of a better existence and eventually to demand for the realization of this better existence. Passivity could be political itself and could have significant political consequences given the historical context. From this realization comes the next emancipatory step of the political subject, that is, to commune and form associations which have the common goals of better working conditions, solidarity with fellow workers, and equality with their masters.

### ***Association, Solidarity, and Workers' Movements***

From a discussion of individual proletarian lives, we now proceed to the analysis of the encounter between the proletarians and the bourgeois in the context of workers' association. As I

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<sup>287</sup> Gauny, quoted by Rancière in *Ibid.*, 63.



mentioned previously, these chance encounters between the proletarians and an “other” in the form of bourgeois poets is pivotal for the proletarians’ move towards emancipation. From the learned bourgeois writers, the workers borrowed words to express themselves and describe their condition. This borrowing, which involves the “translation” of the language of the bourgeois in order for the proletarians to speak about their experiences, is interpreted by Rancière as a verification of the equality of intelligence.<sup>288</sup> Furthermore, this encounter between the bourgeois and the proletarians’ experiences, feelings, disappointments, and suffering become political as the proletarians transformed from individual experiences into a collective action for political purposes such as denouncing the conditions of proletarian oppression and demanding for proletarian voices to be heard.

The July uprising of 1830, which resulted from a wave of workers’ strikes and organized protests, was a critical point for the rise of “associationism” in 19<sup>th</sup> century France. This event paved the way for the emergence of the “voice of the workers” that demanded to be heard. What was unique in this period was that the proletarians fought for economic and work reforms side-by-side with the bourgeois businessmen in what was known as The Three Glorious Days.<sup>289</sup> After which, the proletarians, in their demand for recognition, started to use the bourgeois method of writing and publishing newspaper articles and founding their own newspapers that expressed their woes and demands for reforms regarding their working conditions and place in society. As a result, this period witnessed a flourishing of new forms of speech by workers as well as a workers’ collective voice that would again play another important role in the revolution of 1848.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> I will discuss more on this in the following chapter where I talk about *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

<sup>289</sup> The French revolution of 1830 also known as the July revolution is the Second French revolution. It led to the overthrow of Charles X, who was replaced by his cousin Louis Philippe, Duke of Orléans, who himself, after 18 years on the throne, was overthrown in 1848. It marked the shift from one constitutional monarchy, under the restored House of Bourbon, to another, the July Monarchy; the transition of power from the House of Bourbon to its cadet branch, the House of Orléans. The most notable characteristic of this revolution is that it made way for the replacement of the principle of hereditary right by popular sovereignty. Encyclopædia Britannica “July Revolution,” (July 20, 2018) < <https://www.britannica.com/event/July-Revolution> > (accessed September 2017)

<sup>290</sup> Deranty, “Logical Revolts” in Key Concepts, 20

The second and third parts of *Proletarian Nights* is an account of the struggles of workers to organize themselves into associations from 1830-1851. Rancière describes the efforts of utopian associations, such as Saint Simonianism, Fourierism, and the Society of the Icarians to preach their ideas to workers in their association to forming a workers' welfare group. This section of the book hallmarks a history of the working-class movement as told by the proletarians using their own accounts. The narratives often focus on the insights of specific individuals that come from different categories of workers such as a joiner, seamstress, locksmith, and printer among others. Rancière's method allowed them to speak not as a collective but as individuals who happen to be identified with the working class but persistently refused to be limited by this class identity. As it was written with the purpose of narrating a history of workers' emancipation through the words of the political agents—the proletarians themselves, the book does not employ a systematic exposition and does not have a single conclusion but flows according to the accounts of workers about their experiences with these associations.

This discussion of workers' association is necessary because it discloses an important argument made by Rancière in relation to his project on workers' emancipation. The book makes the fundamental case that it is impossible to come up with a single, unified, and generalized notion of proletarian identity. The proletarians in the pages of *Proletarian Nights* were neither held together by their class identification nor by a collective consciousness belonging to a specific class. The workers who were recruited in the associations did not belong to established workers' group who had a long history of apprenticeship.<sup>291</sup> Moreover, the stories within the formation of associations also illustrate the encounter between the bourgeois apostles of these associations and the proletarian workers whom they tried to recruit to their movements. Although the associations discontinued in the end, the encounter between the two classes proved to be essential to the formation of the political subjectivity of the proletarians. Lastly, the struggle of the proletarians to

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<sup>291</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Myth of the Artisan Critical Reflections on a Category of Social History" *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 24 (Fall, 1983): 3, < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27671468>>

commune with each other on the common basis of labor made explicit their ambiguous relationship to work. The narratives of the workers in *Proletarian Nights* is an account of how 19<sup>th</sup> century workers struggled to find their own voice in order to change their social conditions. Because this move is a political move by political subjects themselves, the question “who is the subject of politics?” is directly addressed in this text.

The utopian dream of associations of workers sharing a fraternal bond of genuine affection for each other and bound together by the principle of equality is the model that movements such as Saint Simonianism, Fourierism, and the Icarian Society attempted to put into reality. Because of the density of materials presented in *Proletarian Nights*, I will focus the discussion on selected encounters between Saint Simonian apostles and the proletarians they tried to commune with. The aim of the discussion is to show how such an encounter between the bourgeois Saint Simonian apostles and the proletarians contributed to the latter’s realization of their political subjectivity. Although the workers’ association encountered the problem of egotism among their proletarian members, the writings that they left behind demonstrated their equal intellectual capacity and their ambiguous relationship with work. The contradictions in thoughts and actions between the Saint Simonian apostles and their proletarian recruits would demonstrate that what the workers wanted for themselves may not necessarily conform to an identification given to them by others; and it was in the act of negating the identification imposed on them that they became political subjects who could think and speak and whose thoughts and words were products of the rich reality of their experience.

#### The Promises of Association (Equality, Education, Retirement, Family, and Fraternal Love)

Saint Simonianism was a workers’ movement inspired by the ideas of Claude Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon (1760–1825). This workers’ association of bourgeois and proletarian workers adhered to a vision of a productive society based on and benefiting from a “...

union of men engaged in useful work", as the basis of "true equality."<sup>292</sup> Enfantin, one of the founders of the movement, envisioned the aspiration of the Saint Simonian society as "an entirely new life, a life of religion and poetry."<sup>293</sup> To attain this vision, "work" is given utmost value as the means to an end.

The two most appealing promises of Saint Simonianism are: (1) a life in a society of equals bound together by fraternal love, and (2) a life of poetry that is perceived as a life of freedom.<sup>294</sup> In other words, Saint Simonianism introduced a new world to the proletariat whose existence was reduced to chance, survival, and happenstance. Through these promises, the Saint Simonians reached out to workers who longed for equality and fraternal bonds. There are several passages in *Proletarian Nights* where workers expressed their elation at the experience of witnessing fellow human beings through the Saint Simonianism bond. For example, Désirée Véret who originally felt isolated from the world describing herself as "highly contemptuous of the human species...tranquil in my indifference and self-sufficient..."<sup>295</sup> was brought to what she described as a "feeling of a more fundamental communion with the people of July."<sup>296</sup> Upon witnessing Enfantin, one of the founders of the Saint Simonian movement, she writes:

I was happy to see those noble workers crowd around you...I am truly of the people because I always commune with them when I see them gathered together in the public square, whether they have come there sullen and fierce to energetically demand freedom and bread or have come to see up close the man that I love among all men. My love for them always rises to the point of rapture. My tear-filled eyes rest on those masses.... They are truly the heart of God. Happy the man, happy the woman, who will know how to make themselves loved by them.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>292</sup>Jacques Rancière, *Short Voyages to the Land of the People*, translated by James B. Swenson, (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 26.

<sup>293</sup> *Oeuvres de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin*, XIV, 73-74 quoted by Rancière in *Proletarian Nights*, 214.

<sup>294</sup> For an account of the apostles of Saint Simonianism, see *Proletarian Nights. The Army of Work* *Proletarian Nights*, 137.

<sup>295</sup> Désirée Véret to Enfantin, Oct 20, 1832, Fonds Enfantin Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. Ms. 7608, quoted by Rancière in *Ibid* 105.

<sup>296</sup> Rancière, *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>297</sup> Désirée Véret to Enfantin, quoted by Rancière in *Ibid.*

Désirée Véret was one of the Saint Simonian converts whose initial misanthropy was reversed into a feeling of solidarity and love for her fellow human beings. The powerful experience of Véret upon her encounter with Saint Simonianism proves how a feeling of fraternal bond and equality can transform an individual's disposition and elicit positive feelings such as a solidarity with others.

The misfortunes and suffering, which served as the great equalizer of the proletarians, were converted to the positive affect of solidarity by introducing the members to a community that provided them with equal prospects for the improvement of their living condition. These were the motivations of proletarians who joined Saint Simonianism as they themselves wrote in their professions of faith in the movement. In the chapter "The Army of Work," Rancière describes the list of "acceptants" of Saint Simonianism as a list of people who aim to "discourage in advance any attempt at classification of capacities and organization into association."<sup>298</sup> The individuals who made their profession of Saint-Simonian faith by November 1831 consists of the following:

one printer, two type-founders, one floor-tiler, two house-painters, one cotton-spinner, one bookkeeper (employed as a carrier at *Le Globe*), two masons, four shoemakers, one apprentice tapestry-worker, one hosier, three joiners, one day-laborer, one common laborer at the mint, one sawyer, one type-polisher (female), one glover (female), two colorists, one cook (female), seven or eight workingwomen (linen-workers, day-laborers, washerwomen, or burnishers). To which is attached a complementary list: three printing compositors, one artist-painter, one gatherer, one clerk, two stitchers, one laundress, and one shoemaker.<sup>299</sup>

The above list of workers is notable not only for the heterogeneity of its composition but also for the absence of the mainstream artisans "who are nevertheless remarkable for their traditions of solidarity and giving help to the unemployed," e.g., tawers, leathermakers, tanners, curriers, carpenters. Rancière states that, "it is in the dispersion of individuals whom no family or territorial law rivets to the place where they reside, whom no tradition or vocation has destined for

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<sup>298</sup>Ibid., 144.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

the craft they exercise”<sup>300</sup> that the new associations developed. The workers recruited in Saint Simonianism were mostly those who wanted to improve their lives or their fellow workers’ by joining the workers’ association. Contrary to classical accounts of history, which argue that the reason for worker militancy is the pride of workers in their respective crafts,<sup>301</sup> this list proves that people join workers’ association for reasons such as the need for security and the need for emotional bond and ‘familial love’ where there is no hierarchy among members. These workers who played a major role in overthrowing the monarchy and challenging those who were in the seats of power decided to form associations in order to protect themselves by establishing cooperatives, workers’ welfare, community funds for education among many other things. Once again, this proves that proletarians are not morally and cognitively impaired and that they are capable of deciding what is best for them.

The Saint Simonian movement, which was based on the doctrine of universal love and which, at the same time, gave emphasis to the importance of family and individual welfare, provided the worker with a sense of security. Aside from work, the word, which attracted the neophyte members of the faith to the movement, was the word “love.”<sup>302</sup> The description given by Delaporte in his report as the director of the twelfth ward, which is about the colorer of engravings, Mademoiselle Pollonais, establishes this. Describing Pollonais, Delaporte wrote:

She has not yet attained a very lofty social viewpoint. What seems to have prompted her adherence is not so much the broad and immense goal of association and universal transformation, which she likes but finds hard to embrace in its full compass, as the happiness of having around her a family of her own choice to love and be loved. But from the standpoint where her organization and education have placed her, she is attached to us by the most indissoluble tie—by the love she has for us and expects from us.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 144.

<sup>301</sup> Rancière, *the Myth of the Artisan*.

<sup>302</sup> Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 159.

<sup>303</sup> Report of Delaporte Cf. the army of work quoted by Rancière in *Ibid.*, 160.

The case of Mademoiselle Pollonais clearly demonstrates that for proletarians, affects such as love is a strong basis of communion. In direct contrast to Marx and Marxist intellectuals who argue that feelings are signs of the proletarian incapacity to grasp the logic of exploitation, Rancière emphasizes the role of ‘affects’ in the formation of these associations and in the whole process of politics. Highlighting the emotions and the thoughts of the proletarians, which are inseparable from each other, Rancière directly counter argues theories that neglect affects as a component of politics. In fact, these tiny emotions and gestures that often go under the radar of classical accounts of politics do have an immense impact on politics. Considering the historical context, these workers who seem to talk about mere feelings and longing are the very proletarians who participated in the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 in France.

Furthermore, the proletarian discovery of their own feelings and experiences, the workers’ encounter with the works of bourgeois apostles of Saint Simonianism provided the language through which the workers articulated their desires and aspirations. Through their words, we could surmise that with the use of bourgeois literature, philosophy and science, the worker learned “to define the meaning of his own life and struggle and not the “secret of the commodity.””<sup>304</sup> Rancière argues that: “It is not knowledge of exploitation that the worker needs in order “to stand tall in the face of that which is ready to devour him.” What he lacks and needs is a knowledge of self that reveals to him a being dedicated to something else besides exploitation...”<sup>305</sup> Saint Simonianism was crucial for workers’ formation of a model for a better life where everyone was equally bound by love for each other and where there was no distinction between masters and employees. It was likewise instrumental in educating the children of workers in order to alleviate their undesirable social and living situation.

In their professions of faith, some Saint Simonians expressed their feelings of happiness at encountering a movement where everyone was treated first as a human being, then as a family

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<sup>304</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 20.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*

member. One profession of faith shared: “Before you, we were merely the springs of an immense machine that operated only on need; now that your voice has spoken and your doctrine has been understood, we are, or at least we are becoming, human beings.”<sup>306</sup> The experience was so powerful to the point that it could surpass any philanthropy, becoming almost like an experience of divine revelation. “I could not imagine that people so unselfish existed.... I set foot on a land unknown to me.... I thought it was a dream appearing to me.... I approach closer, and imagine my astonishment when I became convinced that your assembly was made up of but a single family.”<sup>307</sup>

One worker expressed how alive he felt at experiencing solidarity with other human beings:

On that day, and only on that day in my past life, did I glimpse, in the midst of the people revolting as a single human being, the future that I find today. I felt myself alive with the life of those around me when my hand, covered with the muck of the heroic street, shook the honorably callused hand of the worker, the smooth white hand of the student, and even the hand of the bourgeois idler; it was always a human being moved by my fears and my hopes. A secret flame, a divine voice, revealed a UNIVERSAL ASSOCIATION to me. O my fathers, of all the news I yearned for, what good news it brought me! That instantaneous movement that brought me closer to a human being and worked its effect in the two of us as in every being, that feeling which invited me to gently reveal secrets to a human being whose name and life I had no need to know in order to confide in him, said to me: No, human beings are not born to hate, they are born to love; yes, association and love are their needs. Ah, I no longer miss that paradise promised to the mere spirituality of my “being alone. Henceforth I will touch and hear and see loving beings who are alive with my life.”<sup>308</sup>

The idea of communal life became so appealing to the workers; it was one of the main encounters that members of Saint Simonianism anticipated. This is particularly noticeable in the words of artist Baret and Henry: “See, the moment is approaching when we are going to gather together, to live together around one and the same table, seeing ourselves as one single family, united by the bonds of fraternity and friendship.”<sup>309</sup> This prospect of a communal life was a refuge

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<sup>306</sup> Laurent Orion, Profession of Faith, quoted by Rancière in Proletarian Nights, 159.

<sup>307</sup> Professions of faith by Guérineau, Madame Nollet, and Colas. quoted by Rancière, Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> Machereau, Profession of faith, L’Organisateur, March 5, 1831. 181-182 quoted by Rancière, Ibid

<sup>309</sup> Professions of faith by Colas and Raimbault. quoted by Rancière Ibid., 187.



away from the world of egotism, humiliation, and hatred among workers, for example, Colas and Raimbault:

You have taken me away from the public pillory to admit me to an abode of delights.... You have taken me out of darkness to call me to your association. You have delivered me from all fraud and dissimulation; you have snatched me away from that egotistical people.<sup>310</sup>

The story of the formation of associations reveals affects as a neglected aspect of the proletarian political life. The recurring theme of longing for a family and a community where individuals are able to feel a sense of security, belonging, and love, clearly demonstrates that people are willing to come together because of a sense of community with other human beings who have the same vision of an association where they love and share resources freely and where they can look after each other.

The romantic love between two proletarian union leaders shows how love can transform into social love, which is essential for social revolution. This can be gleaned from the letter of the seamstress Désirée Véret who founded *La Femme libre* to the one time editor of *La Phalange* Victor Considérant: “I loved you passionately...But I never found a word of love to say to you, nor a caress to give you.”<sup>311</sup> Rancière considers this romantic love as “undoubtedly necessary to shape the dominant passion of their two characters, which is also the essential force behind progress: social love.”<sup>312</sup> Véret was a woman who was drawn to her lover not initially through romantic love but through the social ideals of the latter. Véret described her feelings in the letter saying: “I dreamed of free love and I knew that your sentiments were engaged and that the line of your destiny was marked out; I loved your apostle’s soul, and I united my soul with yours in the

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<sup>310</sup> Professions of faith by Colas and Raimbault. quoted by Rancière Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> Désirée Veret to Victor Considérant quoted by Rancière in Ibid., 427.

<sup>312</sup> It was also necessary to complete the primary education wherein this woman, who never found happiness except in “the life of emotion and passionate love,” found herself “drawn to the apostle of social ideas” even before being responsive to sensual emotions.” Ibid.

social love that has been the dominant passion of my life.”<sup>313</sup> Indeed, Véret found in her affection for her lover a strong inspiration to live her own journey towards emancipation. This means that her own militancy was ignited and sustained by the strong emotions that she felt for another human being, which demonstrates that there is a direct link between emotions and political actions.

When these affects are ignored, the result is an identification that diverges from who the proletarians are and what they really want. Rancière pays careful attention to these emotions in order to remind theorists, with the likes of Althusser and even Marx, that what we think about proletarians does not necessarily define them. In fact, their seeming useless dreams and negligible emotions were the beginning of emancipation. In the case of the 19th century workers, it served as the foundation of the revolutions that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The proletarians do not merely compose the brute force of the revolution, and they are not in dire need of a “head” to organize their uncontrollable passions. These uncontrollable passions and dreams are the very heart and soul of political mobilization in the 19th century.

### ***Egotism and Workers’ Ambiguous Relationship to Work***

The profession of faith by Saint Simonian members of the ideals of their society such as equality, universal sympathy for humanity, and engagement in useful work, often contradicted the reality of proletarian life. The disconnect between ideals, expectation, goals and the difficulty experienced by proletarians in real life lead to many challenges within the workers association. My goal in this section is not to emphasize on the failure of associations to actualize their vision but to describe the two major challenges that workers encountered. However, despite the many problems encountered, the role of affects, emotions and dreams were undeniable when it comes to proletarian struggle towards emancipation. There were two major challenges that the workers encountered in their effort to organize themselves. First is egotism and second is their ambiguous relationship to work.

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

Saint Simonianism, which was established on the doctrine of equality and fraternal love, eventually succumbed to egotism. Some members who professed their faith to the association were primarily concerned with material sustenance. They viewed the association as their escape from poverty but they were not willing to work. The second reason is that Saint Simonianism taught that the egotism of the proletariat should be overcome through dedication to a life of work. Yet, the bourgeois apostles never suffered the same working conditions the proletariat recruits had to endure. Rancière asks: “But how could human beings “immersed in the battles of egotism”- that is, in the daily struggle to find the means to stay alive- rise to the level of humanitarian sympathy if the example did not come from those who could do it at less cost?”<sup>314</sup> Unlike the bourgeois Saint Simonians who deliberately chose to commune with the workers and live through the fruits of their own labor, the proletariat recruits did not have the luxury of choice whether to engage in labor or not. Gauny’s reply to his friend Retouret berates the latter’s effort to glorify work:

The streaming voluptuousness of labor’s sweat and toil? How would you know about them since you never worked?...Moses mine, I am not a stout worker. I am, for myself, a fatal, necessary worker...My robust strength is simply nervous energy, my bold courage is galvanizing courage, and my dark eye is a fool’s eye.<sup>315</sup>

The apostles had high expectations that proved to be taxing for proletariat recruits who were not able to live up to the expectations of their society, thus leading to the failure of Saint Simonianism. A letter of the Saint Simonian apostles to Enfantin narrates the realization of this failure:

I write to you with hands blackened by iron fillings and oil...In the capacity of a manual laborer turning the wheel, I have given proofs of courage, strength and perseverance. I have known what it is to eat bread moistened by the sweat of monotonous labor.... We thought our behavior would be such to impress the least impressionable.. It has been nothing of the sort.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 198.

<sup>315</sup> Gauny to Retouret, Feb 2, 1834, Fonds Gauny, Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Denis, Ms. 165; in Rancière (ed), *Le philosophe plebéien*, p. 166. quoted by Rancière in *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>316</sup> Letters of Hoart, Rogé and Bruneau to Enfantin, Feb-April 1833, Fonds Enfantin, Ms 7647 quoted by Rancière in *Ibid.*, 224.

The Society of Saint Simonianism discontinued as it was confronted by workers' miseries that prevented the proletarians from engaging in the apostolic work of the community. It was what the apostles called a double failure: "the failure to forge a body of apostles who would transfigure the sufferings and the routines of the proletarian body; and the futility of the sacrifice itself, to which the demonstration of the missionaries was then reduced."<sup>317</sup> Along with the acceptance of this failure was the realization that the proletarians were not entirely ignorant of the power of their labor. Also, the reason for their resistance to the Saint Simonian teaching of the significance of labor was not because they were lazy, ignorant, and selfish. Their resistance sprang from their ambiguous relationship with work. Labor, for the worker, was both his home and his prison. It was not easy to bring proletarians together on the basis of the common factor, i.e., "work," simply because it was impossible for someone to love the very cause of one's suffering. As summarized by Gauny's statement about his relationship with work: "To the right and left of us, before and behind us, is work.... work with its inquisitional demands ... holds me stuck in the glue pot of its cloaca."<sup>318</sup> The experience of being directly confronted by work, and of having no choice about one's relationship with work must have been cumbersome for Gauny as well as for any other worker who, on the one hand, needed work but, at the same time, wanted to escape from work. In agreement with this, Rancière further elaborates as he writes:

Even more importantly, work is not a gift that the proletarian could contribute in an exchange of love. Work, properly speaking, is his alienation, not something he divests himself of but something that comes to him from outside: the bourgeois people are the ones who give work. And the relationship to be had with them as workers is always that of asking for work, whether it be humble or sullen, individual or collective. Love is necessarily beyond this obligatory relationship between work and the request for it.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Rancière, *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>318</sup> Gauny, quoted by Rancière in *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>319</sup> Rancière, *Ibid.*, 211.

Even if the Society of Saint Simonians provided the proletarians with work, this was not enough to overcome the hierarchy of the classes. In such a hierarchical relationship, “love” does not exist and the connection remains obligatory. The proletarians were not willing to enter into that kind of relation because, being a hierarchy, there is always room for exploitation. This proletarian demand for love and fraternal bonds over relations of work again demonstrates how positive affects are a necessary component for workers in order to come together and mobilize. The joiner Gauny best describes the feeling of the proletarian torn between the desire for communion and the chaos brought about by a miserable life:

Two inconsistencies come together in me. The one comes by way of electric impulses. It is a virile will, a primordial force to act, to advance in perfection, to love without constraint or restriction, and to crush the hydra that imprisons me. The other is a solitary, sophistic, horrible impulse. I see and love your harmony, and do not see any harmony in myself. I would like to mingle my voice with the modulations of your hymns. My mouth is nailed shut. I cannot launch my prayer into the flames of your prayers. I cannot pray. A nightmarish impediment makes my life an infernal delirium and the quivering idea of an improbable dream....I shall always be loyal to your cause, but shall turn aside and keep away from the joys of those who come to share your works on the days of assembly.<sup>320</sup>

Ultimately, the joiner-poet Gauny made the choice to be a Saint Simonian only in name as he refused to be an apostle of the Society. This refusal shows that if proletarians are brought together by abstract ideals but are never asked what they really want, then any workers’ association is bound to fail. Nevertheless, despite the brief success of these associations, it is also impossible to ignore that their, concrete attempts at founding utopian communities are the beginning of workers’ cooperatives and mutual aid where the proletarians can fulfill a part of their dream to live in communities that help each other and are governed by fraternal love. Given everything that has been said about workers and their attempt to commune in order to emancipate themselves, what fundamental lesson on emancipation can be learned from their actions?

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<sup>320</sup> Gauny to Retouret, July 24, 1832, Fonds Gauny, Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Denis, Ms. 165; reprinted in Jacques Rancière (ed.), *Louis Gabriel Gauny: Le philosophe plébéien* (Paris: La Découverte/Maspéro, 1983), pp. 162–63. quoted by Rancière in *Proletarian Nights*, Ibid., 212-213.

## **Affects, Imagination and the Body: Political Subjectivity in Rancière's *Proletarian Nights***

Emancipation from conditions of oppression is the common goal of workers' struggle. In *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière remains consistent with two of his central arguments on emancipation. First, there is his famous position since his break away from Althusserian Marxism, that is, proletarians are not blind to the state of their oppression; they are, in fact, capable of seeing themselves and having a full understanding of their suffering. Secondly, it is precisely because of this recognition that they struggle to take advantage of the opportunities toward emancipation presented to them, in the case of *Proletarian Nights*, joining workers' association and being active in them.

For Rancière, it is not correct to attribute the proletarian condition of oppression to one's incapacity, or an inability, or lack of agency. Rather, as he writes, "People are not unable because they ignore the reason for their being there. They are unable because being unable means the same as being there."<sup>321</sup> Workers are tied to specific presuppositions about their occupation by an established arrangement of elements of society that limit their identity to a list of expectations about this identity. For instance, what accompanies the notion of a "worker" is that he is poor and incapable of engaging in activities that are not aligned with his craft because he does not have the time to do so. What is worse than this is the idea that the worker should either work relentlessly or starve and there is nothing else for him beyond that.

The pages of *Proletarian Nights* verify the several ways in which the proletarians broke away from this equation of occupation=specific capacities. Rancière drew out numerous examples of such breaks in workers' dreams from the simple childhood enjoyment of learning to aspirations of living in communities of friendship and love where all are treated as equals. It was evident in the workers' inversion of time when they transformed their nights into days in order to read and write articles and poetry, as well as their displacement of bourgeois writers' language to write their own thoughts, that the proletarians were into the serious business of performing capacities other

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<sup>321</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Afterword: The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions" in *Jacques Rancière : History, Politics, Aesthetics*, 275.

than what were expected of them. All these efforts, whether reveries or actual struggle to form themselves into a collective association, embody the proletarian desire for emancipation. Emancipation, for workers, is as concrete as the difficult circumstances that plague the proletarian life. In fact, their experiences of exploitation, suffering, friendship and love form the beginning of their journey towards emancipation. The seemingly negligible pain of the people comprising the proletarian class and the efforts that they exerted to form into communities in order to improve their conditions are concrete political moments towards emancipation. The proletarians who were part of the French revolutions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whom Rancière writes about in *Proletarian Nights*, provide the historical proofs that little gestures, which are often unnoticed, are the very roots of politics.

In *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière employs a unique method, which is similar to storytelling in order to be “able to deploy a narrative storyline and bring out the perceptible texture of experience.”<sup>322</sup> This explains why *Proletarian Nights* is filled with stories of the lives of workers, which alternate between heartbreaking accounts of suffering and happy moments of dreaming and imagining as they struggled to emancipate themselves from their difficulties. The description of the proletarian experience by the workers themselves are supposed to make us see that political subjects, such as workers, are capable of thinking and that there is a need for us to rethink and reflect on how we perceive them and treat their speech acts. Also, although words are necessary in conveying the experiences of workers, their words are mere tools draw our attention to their experiences.

When Rancière speaks of emancipation in the specific context of his archival work in *Proletarian Nights*, he points out to specific junctures where the subject demonstrates his or her capacity to be free from the capitalist relations of production. By emancipation, Rancière does not mean a state of society where the workers do not have to toil; rather, it is a state where an individual is no longer defined by his identification as a worker, where she has found a way to possess labor

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<sup>322</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality*, 33.

and its products and where she has learned to escape the brutalizing pain of the workshop by inventing different ways of saying, doing, and being; for instance, a seamstress forms a women's workers' group, a joiner becomes a poet, and a locksmith dreams of being a painter. From an individual effort towards emancipation, what follows is the coming together of emancipated individuals.

Emancipation from oppressive working conditions is the collective dream of workers who joined workers' association like the Saint Simonians, the Fourierists, or the Icarians. Rancière explains that workers' struggle to alleviate their social conditions begins not by abandoning work but with the individual subject who first discovers in and through herself a way to rebel against the oppressive conditions surrounding her existence. In this kind of emancipation, feelings or affects that shape the proletarian understanding of their condition have an essential role because they become the materials through which the worker comes to a full understanding of his existential situation. These feelings push the proletarians toward escapism from their suffering either by imagining and reflecting or by forming workers' associations. For Rancière, "The rebel is still another worker: the emancipated worker cannot not be a rebel. The voluptuousness of emancipation is a fever from which one cannot be cured and which one cannot help but communicate."<sup>323</sup> This worker stays as a worker but invents several ways in order to free himself from oppression. Hence emphasizing the view that there is no single path to emancipation. As Rancière writes: "But the pathways of this hastening are not exactly quick or straight. The obstacle in this case does not come from the master-jailers. It is a matter of knowing which way these pathways of liberty go, pathways that can be traveled only by individuals who have already been liberated."<sup>324</sup> In *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière asks a question that clearly implies this notion of emancipation:

How can one establish in the intervals of servitude, the new time of liberation: not the insurrection of slaves but the advent of new sociability between individuals who

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<sup>323</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Ibid*, 83

<sup>324</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Ibid.*, 68



have already, each on his own, thrown off the servile passions that are indefinitely reproduced by the rhythm of work hours, the cycles of activity and rest, and the alternations of employment and unemployment?<sup>325</sup>

Several important points regarding Rancière's notion of emancipation are highlighted in the aforementioned question. Emancipation does not happen outside work but in the so-called "intervals of servitude." It is an escape from the activity of work within work, a negotiation of one's relationship with work itself. The emancipation of the worker relies on a fundamental creative capacity to escape the confines of work hours and the constraints of the walls of the workshop through seemingly useless activities such as dreaming, imagining, and performing activities unexpected from one's occupation. This means that Rancière knows very well that the worker has more to lose than his chains and, in fact, loves life and his fellowmen. The worker cares for his welfare is capable of finding alternative means of emancipation before resorting to an armed revolution. What the proletarian relinquishes is not his work but his enslavement to work. This does not however downplay the role of revolution nor does it mean that Rancière is against revolution, what he does is to draw attention to the gestures of proletarians that have the same effect of seizing time and space to contest one's exclusion and pinpoint the wrong in society, just as what a revolution does.

The paradigmatic example that Rancière uses to emphasize on the idea of a creative capacity to escape workers' exploitation is Gauny's *cenobitic economy*. The joiner Gauny invented "a science" with the goal of emancipation. *Cenobitic economy* entails moderation of consumption and a form of asceticism that reduces the proletarians' dependence on work and the order of production that makes him prone to exploitation. Gauny explains:

Moderation is far from helping the tyrant to subject the worker to the smallness of his wages. The saving that the latter is to make is an intelligent and scorching weapon that cuts the other to the quick. The one who produces must work when as he feels like it, profiting from the entire gain of his work; and he must legitimately earn a great deal to purchase a great deal of existence and liberty.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>326</sup> Gauny, "Économie cénobitique," Fonds Gauny, Ms. 15; extracts in Rancière (ed.), *Le philosophe plébien*, pp. 99-111. quoted by Jacques Rancière in *Ibid* 84-85.

*Cenobitic economy* is focused on developing the strengths of the proletarian and establishing worker's independence by shifting the emphasis not into the possession of the product of labor but through the possession of oneself. Gauny suggests that workers should control their consumption in order for them to save up and not be enslaved to a system that requires them to work. For Gauny and in as much as it is also true for Rancière, workers' emancipation does not rely in factors that are external to the workers because everyone is capable of emancipation.

Rancière's notion of emancipation is interesting because it does not entail the negation of the creativity of labor. An emancipated worker is one who is not possessed by the master and one who is not tied up to the workshop. He owns the instrument of labor, which is his body. Gauny, writing about himself in the third person, describes how he, as an emancipated worker, feels: "This man is made tranquil by the ownership of his arms, which he appreciates better than the day-laborer, because no look of a master precipitates their movements. He believes that his powers are his own when no will but his own activates them."<sup>327</sup> The path to emancipation, thus begins from self-determination or the subject's recognition of a capacity to be other than the identification, which has been imposed on her.

The question of emancipation is directly related to the process of subjectivation. This is because emancipation entails the movement of the subject to lose its original identification by going against the distribution of the sensible. Moreover, this movement of disidentification is a "possession of self through which loss of self is reproduced."<sup>328</sup> The pathway is spiral, where Rancière first mentions that emancipation is essentially tied to a loss of subjectivity. The said statement appears paradoxical because it conveys the possession of a self, which is actually premised upon a production of the loss of self. Emancipation is the act of the subject to shed on and off identifications in the effort to point out the wrong or the miscount, e.g., becoming a joiner

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<sup>327</sup> Gauny, *Le travail a la tache*," in Rancière (ed.). *Le philosophe plebeien*. 46-47 quoted by Jacques Rancière in *Proletarian Nights*, 80.

<sup>328</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 82.

and a poet at the same time. The means toward emancipation initially begins within work but digresses away from it. In the end, the emancipated individual is still a worker; he does not cease to be a worker, and the only and main difference is that he or she is no longer defined by the presuppositions of his identification. Rancière writes:

The movement here is that of a spiral that, in the very resemblance of the circles in which the same energy is consumed for the benefit of the enemy, achieves a real ascent toward a different mode of social existence. Because a different society presupposes the production of a different humanity, not a destructive confrontation with the master or the bourgeois class, because the healing of the ill entails the singular asceticism of rebellion and its apostolic propagation, the illusion of emancipation is not a nonrecognition reproducing domination but the twisted path whose circle comes as close as possible to this reproduction, but with an already crucial swerve or digression.<sup>329</sup>

Nobody represents this path to emancipation better than Gauny who does not flee from work. This joiner exemplifies a worker who has shed off a worker's servile relationship with work, not by abandoning the workshop. Instead, what he does is to "turn himself into a marginal insider, a floor-layer on a piecework basis, working his own hours in houses without master, overseer, or colleagues."<sup>330</sup> Through this, he frees himself from a dependence on a master who decides whether he should be given work or not. The emancipated proletarian finds his place "in work where he breathes at his ease and is at home!"<sup>331</sup> This home, which constitutes where he performs his labor, is also the stage of his emancipation where in between his toil, this carpenter's thoughts drift away to the trees and the clouds he sees outside the window. As Rancière describes below:

Being at home means fleeing the workshop of the master, but not for the sake of a place more inhabited by human warmth or humanitarian kindness. Fleeing, on the contrary, to that deserted space that is not yet a residence: a vacant place where the masons have finished their work but the owners have not yet installed their belongings—hence, a place where for this brief interval the constraint is broken that wedges the laborer between the entrepreneur, master of work, and the bourgeois man, master of the proprietary order, so that the floor-layer will be able

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<sup>329</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Ibid.*, 82

<sup>330</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Ibid.*, 78

<sup>331</sup> Gauny, *Le travail à la tâche*, Fonds Gauny, Ms. 134; in Rancière (ed.), *Le philosophe plebeian*, p. 45. Quoted by Rancière in *Ibid.*

to arrange a staging of his work that will be both the semblance of his ownership and the reality of his liberty.<sup>332</sup>

A vital component of a worker's emancipation is his inversion of time. Instead of a linear time becoming an instrument of domination, the worker transforms his nights into days and transforms time into an instrument that is made to work in his favor. He lives with the hatred of the days when he needs to work but, is able to find within these working hours some moments of liberation. These moments are characterized as aesthetic moments that involve the transformation of the worker's relationship with the space surrounding him. Rancière quotes Gauny who describes himself using the third person:

“Better than a mirror,” the soul of the floor-layer reflects the sights around him. He cannot earn the purity of his night by debasing the purity of his workday. It is the harmony stolen from this place, from which he will soon be excluded, that makes him feel at home: “Believing himself at home, he loves the arrangement of a room so long as he has not finished laying the floor. If the window opens out on a garden or commands a view of a picturesque horizon, he stops his arms a moment and glides in imagination toward the spacious view to enjoy it better than the possessors of the neighboring residences.”<sup>333</sup>

In this brief moment where a worker stops to enjoy his view and the results of his labor, he possesses the space prior to its owner who has commissioned him to work. Two observable and powerful gestures of this worker are demonstrated here. First, he stops his arms signaling a pause from work; second, his imagination transforms his workplace into his possession, and he begins to relish in it like no one else can. Both these gestures, born of his own volition, alter the situation of the once deprived worker even though momentarily. This act of disputing his original status as a joiner by asserting the possibility of a different state is a political move by the subject who reclaims a space that originally belongs equally to everyone.

When a worker learns an attitude toward work and the product of one's work such as the one described above, there is a whole layer of transformation in perception of his condition and in

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<sup>332</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Ibid.*, 78-79

<sup>333</sup> Gauny. *Le Travail a la tache* in Rancière (ed), *Le philosophe plebeian*, 45-46 quoted by Rancière in *Ibid.*, 81.

an experience such as unemployment. For instance, Gauny's relationship with unemployment also undergoes an inversion. Unemployment becomes a time to wander and enjoy the moments of not being forced to work. It ceases to be perceived as a slow erosion of life or the dispossession of the environment, or a "flight pursued by fate."<sup>334</sup> Rather, the unemployed worker is like a conqueror who marches in the streets of the city, intoxicated with his liberty, and receives from the multitude of slaves the respect due to "a superior type of humanity":

For this man of rebellion is a passionate advocate of propaganda. If his inquiring efforts are useless, he puts off his pursuit of work to the next day and walks for a long time to satisfy his need for action and to enjoy, as a plebeian philosopher, the ravishing nonchalance of liberty, which is filled to overflowing with serenity and energy by the pomp of the sun, the breath of the wind, and his own thoughts in line with the impetuosités of nature.<sup>335</sup>

Gauny insists on being a philosopher and on being in a space where he is not meant to be by walking all over places where he is not expected to be seen. Because a worker is only supposed to be inside the workshop devoting his time to his toil, Gauny insists on being elsewhere. He walks the streets and enjoys walking without care; he contemplates and writes poems. Yet, he is aware that these are only momentary escapes, contrary to Althusserian Marxists as well as several other thinkers who claim that the proletarians who strive toward emancipation on their own are deluded, unconscious, and unaware of their real situation. Describing the worker, Rancière asserts:

So he is not unaware of the fact that at the end of his "free" course he will have neither château nor cottage, or even those palaces of ideas that adorn the want of them. Apparently it is not on the side of the robust hands and productive work that one must call for the dissipation of illusion: because work, the worker's possession of his work, is the very heart of the illusion, and also because, at the same time, there is no illusion in the sense meant by philosophers and politicians—that is, something opposed to conscious awareness of a destiny endured or of the right conditions for transforming it. For this "illusion" is completely transparent. It is not unaware of anything about its causes or effects and seals no pact with the enemy it serves.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>335</sup> Gauny. *Le Travail a la tache* in Rancière (ed), *Le philosophe plebeian*, 47 Quoted by Rancière in *Ibid*.

<sup>336</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights* 81

The proletarian emancipates himself or herself by allowing her imagination to encounter a different life free from oppression. She is able to achieve this through the capacity to think, to say, and to be otherwise. The journey to emancipation is a path that she must first walk in and by himself or herself until she eventually meets others who walk the same path. In this journey, she is shaped by the myriad of emotions and experiences that envelop her entire life as a proletarian subject.

This emancipation is also a process of political subjectivation as the worker dis-identifies with an imposed identification and acquires a new identity, which she has chosen for herself. The process of political subjectivation first involves recognition of oneself or an awareness of oneself. This first step involves a denial, resistance, or negation of one's given space and place in the established order of things in society. In this move toward freedom, the encounter with the bourgeois writers is a pivotal encounter that lends to the worker a language by which she could speak of her experiences and her demands.

From *Althusser's Lesson* to *Logical Revolts*, Rancière was focused on his critique of Althusser and later on of Marx. The *Proletarian Nights* is still part of this project of deconstructing theories that render the political subject blind to ideology. However, in contrast to the first two books, Rancière in *Proletarian Nights* fleshes out his critique by allowing the proletarians to speak for themselves about what they thought of their experiences, how they struggled to have better lives, and what they thought about the bourgeois and of their fellow workers. Rancière made more explicit, his argument about the radical equality of intelligence, by demonstrating how proletarians transformed their misery into poetic expressions. In the encounter between the bourgeois and the proletarians, the workers were able to dream about living in communities bound by fraternal love.

The focus of *Proletarian Nights* was on the struggle of the workers. Through these struggle stories, Rancière intends to show who the workers are and what they are capable of doing on their own without the help of anyone who wants to organize or mobilize them for the purpose of the collective goal. Following the stories of the workers in *Proletarian Nights*, the goal of the workers

was to help each other and treat each other as human beings. They share the common vision of having communities where everyone is treated equally with love. These dreams were enough to fuel the workers into revolting against the existing regimes of power in 19<sup>th</sup> century France. Their seeming irrational feelings moved them to claim their rights to speech and demand for equal political participation. In *Proletarian Nights*, the workers did not cease to be workers; they remained as workers, and the defining point was that they discovered that they could also be poets, writers, or whatever they choose to be.

Gauny is the most quoted character in Rancière's work, but *Proletarian Nights* is one of the least commented books among the latter's writings, for the focus often deals with *Disagreement* and other later works. Rancière rarely speaks about subjects in his mature writings in the same manner that he referred to them in *Proletarian Nights*. In several of his mature writings, he would mention Gauny as the representation of the emancipated political subject. He would depict how Gauny's encounter with literature provided the joiner with the words to talk about his sorrows and joys in the workshop. However, he would not highlight the role of affects in the process of political subjectivation and would, in fact, describe the subject as empty and as a purely formal function. In a number of his mature works, Rancière seems to have refused to use the rich materials he had uncovered in *Proletarian Nights*. In his later works, has Rancière himself fallen into the trap of those whom he criticized as guilty of theorizing about proletarians without the proletarians themselves? What happened to the political subject in the transition of his writing from *Proletarian Nights* to his mature works?

## **Conclusion**

There is a subtle yet notable shift in the way Rancière discusses proletarian subjects in his later works, particularly in *Disagreement*. In fact, he does not discuss the same proletarians in the manner that he does in his earlier works like *Proletarian Nights*. In his seminal work, *Proletarian Nights*, while speech and discourse are fundamental features of the political subject, Rancière also

focuses on workers' affects, passions, and dreams. He also renders their bodily gestures more visible than he does in his later political writings, paying special attention to small movements of individual workers such as the mere putting down of tools or of looking outside the window in order to start dreaming. This subtle shift demonstrates that the fabric of political life is not purely discursive for Rancière and is, in fact, rich with experiences, emotions, and bodily gestures that are essential for emancipation. Although these rich materials on political subjectivity from *Proletarian Nights* have dwindled in his later works on politics, it could not be denied that Rancière's later writings owe much to his early texts. In fact, several key concepts in his mature works are explicated in the 400-page *Proletarian Nights*.

When Rancière collated several entries from the workers' journals, he was establishing the idea of 'literarity' as a state of the social world post revolution, which in turn allowed proletarian demands to be heard and question the 'distribution of the sensible'—the perceptible arrangement of order and authority that determines the manner in which political subjects behave. Here, in its early stages is Rancière's central position that politics is aesthetics and vice-versa. By showing how politics is, in fact, a demonstration of political subjectivity, Rancière establishes the sensible and not merely the discursive aspect of subjectivity. Speech as words and, at the same time, action only becomes possible through the 'equality of intelligence,' another key concept Rancière developed in his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, which I will discuss in the succeeding chapter. Political subjectivity, for Rancière, is a practice of the subject's equal capacity to think. From this presupposition of equality, he developed the method of equality as a way of perceiving political subjects and treating their speech acts with careful consideration in the same manner that one would take the words of a university professor. All these important concepts in Rancière's mature works began to take shape through Rancière's engagement with the words of the workers in his archival work. Obviously, in this work, similar to what happened in Marx's *Capital*, it is also through looking into the experiences of people that Rancière was able to theorize. Once again, it is the subject who taught the philosopher how to philosophize and analyze the workers'



experiences. Moreover, in the case of the relationship between Gauny and Rancière, the philosopher thought side-by-side the worker.

In this chapter, I have shown how Rancière highlights an aspect of the proletarian life that is contrary to what he has stressed in his mainstream orthodox writings, i.e., the affects, dreams, imagination, passions, and bodily gestures of the proletarian political subject. The affects of workers reveal their moments of vulnerability in the workshop, their hunger and poverty that drove their imagination to dream of a better life, as well as their triumphs within the workers' association. The proletarian who experiences pain and draws from this pain a determination to have a better and a different life destroys the common conception of proletarians as dissolute, helpless, and ignorant. Rancière's work can be likened to an unmasking of the proletarian identity that is and has always been connected to these workers to reveal real individuals who have participated in actual revolutions in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rancière's effort was necessary for social emancipation when he identified the misfit between the proletarian identity and the capacities of these workers to feel, dream, and think for themselves. The process of political subjectivation entails that proletarians shed off identifications and later on connect various forms of identification in order to struggle toward emancipation. He negates the representation of proletarians as lazy and fooled by ideology.

Aside from highlighting affects and imagination in the narrative of the proletarians, Rancière also dismantles a common notion of the laboring body as a machine and presents it as a feeling body whose feelings served as materials for proletarian individual reflection. In fact, the main material through which proletarians think about social emancipation are their experiences, passions, and feelings—the ones labeled by Althusserian Marxism as the target of ideology. A careful reading of passages from the proletarian archives Rancière chose to highlight reveals that a number of journal entries he chose often have references to various states of proletarian bodies (e.g., emaciated, exhausted, trembling, excited, passionate, and the like) and gestures of the working body such as walking until one's feet are worn out, looking outside the window, stopping

of the arms, ears listening to workshop bells, taking off hats, and several others. This means that these bodily actions are as equally important as the words of the workers when it comes to their struggle for emancipation and that emancipation is not attained by pure theoretical work. To be succinct, emancipation consists of the visible gestures of the proletarian body.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to return to the words of a woman to her lover in the epilogue of *Proletarian Nights*. In her letter to Victor Considérant, Désirée Véret, a seamstress turned founder of a women workers' association, claims that social love is the dominant passion of her life and that this fueled her determinism and optimism during the days of the revolutions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She also tells the reader that there is an essential lesson, which could be learned from the utopianism of proletarian workers; in fact, utopian proletarian dreams are not delusions or illusions. Contrary to what many scientific thinkers claim, the proletarian knows how to analyze illusions. Véret writes: "Although I have lived more on dreams than on realities, I fear illusions. I destroy them by analyzing them, given that age has calmed my passions."<sup>337</sup> If it is the case that individual proletarians and proletarian associations dreamt of utopia encountered many failures along the way before emancipation actually occurs, it is not because their dreams were illusory and unreal; it is because dreams are fragile seeds of the future that can only take shape once we have learned from these workers the value of being able to recognize the equality of intelligence.

To quote Véret at length:

Utopia has been the mother of the exact sciences and, like many fertile mothers, she has often produced embryos that were sterile or too fragile, embryos born prematurely or under bad circumstances.

Utopia is as old as the organized world. She is the vanguard of the new societies. And she will fashion society, harmony, when human genius makes it a reality through learned demonstrations that dissociate her from obscurities and temporary impossibilities.<sup>338</sup>

The aspirations of the proletarians relied on their own concrete experiences and not on leaders of organized groups who claimed to understand the workers better than how the workers understood

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<sup>337</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 430.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 428.

themselves. Indeed, political subjectivity is highly discursive at first, but *Proletarian Nights* shows us that the speeches of the workers are not empty words or expressions but are full of affects, which uniquely reveal the proletarians as who they are and what they desired. For this political subjectivity to be revealed, it is fundamental that one begins with the presupposition of the equality of intelligence.

## Chapter 5

### Politics and Pedagogy in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*

The focus of this chapter is on one of Rancière's most famous works, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, where he fully explicates his idea of radical equality through the figure of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century founder of the method of universal teaching, Joseph Jacotot. In his earlier writings since his break from Althusser, Rancière had been consistently asserting the political subjects' equal capacity for thinking. This means that contrary to the hierarchical view of intelligences and capacities of individuals, all men are equal in their ability to understand. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, this position reached its maturity. This major text is important and deserves a whole chapter because it directly comes after the lengthy narrative of workers' experiences in *Proletarian Nights* that resulted in the so-called "method of equality." In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière provides a detailed narrative of his encounter with Joseph Jacotot who is pivotal for the conception of the "method of equality." Through Jacotot, Rancière rethinks the relationship between knowledge, understanding, and will. This is directly related to the subject of politics as it deals with the question of agency and what a political subject should possess to achieve emancipation.

Although it does not straightforwardly discuss politics, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* links two fundamental ideas of Rancière on politics: (1) the critique of a notion of emancipation that equates emancipation with the possession of knowledge, an identification which, in turn creates a hierarchical order between or among classes in society; and (2) the reconstruction of politics and political subjectivity that is presupposed by equality. The first idea found its concrete application in Rancière's deconstruction of a tradition of thinking that favors intellectual masters such as Plato, Marx, Sartre, Althusser, and Bourdieu. These major thinkers consider the political subject as mystified and incapable of emancipating themselves from oppression on their own. The second fundamental idea is realized in Rancière's positive way of looking at the political subject as equally intelligent and therefore capable of having a full understanding of her situation, which, in turn, can lead to self-emancipation. In this sense, it is in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* that Rancière offers a

positive solution to what he identified as a problem of doing philosophy according to the great tradition from Plato by drawing on the life and writings of an anonymous teacher in late 18<sup>th</sup>-century France, Joseph Jacotot. The positive solution Rancière found was developed through establishing the foundation of a struggle toward emancipation in the presupposition of equality. The gesture of pitting major thinkers against the anonymous figure of Jacotot is one concrete demonstration of Rancière's dismissal of hierarchies in thinking and a further argument for radical equality. This method, which was discussed in the previous chapter, began in *Proletarian Nights* when Rancière focused on the obscure workers who were part of 19<sup>th</sup> century revolutions in France.

The discussion in this chapter will proceed by first tracing the background of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, followed by an explication of Rancière's main argument regarding the notion of equality.<sup>339</sup> This will put me in a position to draw the connection between the notion of political subjectivity in this text and the previous ones, notably *Proletarian Nights*, and outline more clearly the status of the political subject in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. From *Proletarian Nights* onward, Rancière has consistently asserted the subject's equal capacity for thinking. Although he was not explicit in his early writings about this contention, there seems to be instances in his early writings that already show evidence for this position. For instance, in *Althusser's Lesson* discussed in a previous chapter, Rancière describes how the Lip factory workers demanded to be recognized as equally human like their employers. Rancière adds more examples of this fundamental assertion as he demonstrates in *Proletarian Nights* how the dominated subject eludes a given identification and speaks up the demand to be acknowledged as a thinking being through demonstrating her own capacities for thinking, writing, philosophizing, organizing and fighting against those who exploit her. All these claims of equality reached a point of maturation in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* where Rancière devotes an entire book to the discussion of how Joseph Jacotot's method of universal

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<sup>339</sup> This may sound against the very critique of explication, which is a core message of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* but it is a necessary task for this chapter in order to emphasize on the important concepts that are directly related to the notion of political subjectivity.

teaching shows equality as a presupposition and not a goal, and how a subject's emancipation is not related to the possession of elite knowledge.

*The Ignorant Schoolmaster* made Rancière famous among education theorists, for this work was initially perceived as a work on pedagogy.<sup>340</sup> However, Rancière's intention in turning to Jacotot was not mainly because of pedagogy but because of the question of knowledge, of who can acquire knowledge, and how these issues relate to emancipation, hence questions about the politics of knowledge. These questions are central to his approach to politics and his theory of the subject of politics. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* was not written to directly intervene in educational debates in their technical dimension. It is true though that Rancière's general aim in focusing on pedagogical matters for the sake of politics was motivated by discussions at that time in France. Such discussions centered on the ideas of justice, equality, fairness, and the realization of the republican model through education. Because of this, it is important to have a basic grasp of the status of the debate Rancière was intervening into in order to set the political context for his arguments in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and show the full scope of the book's famous and controversial claims.

### **The Debate on Education in France in the 1980's**

Rancière's thoughts are always sensitive to the context of the polemics of his time. This condition holds true for most of his writings, including *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Broadly speaking, the book traces its roots to a long history of debates in France regarding education as a

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<sup>340</sup> There are those theorists whose works are directed towards linking Rancière and other critical pedagogues in order to explore the link between education and emancipation. See for instance 1.) T. E. Lewis "Education in the Realm of the Senses: Understanding Paulo Freire's Aesthetic Unconscious through Jacques Rancière." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 2 (2009): 285–299. 2.) G. Biesta "Toward a 'New Logic of Emancipation': Foucault and Rancière." *Philosophy of Education*, 2008 169–177. 3.) G. Biesta "A New Logic of Emancipation: The Methodology of Jacques Rancière." *Educational Theory* 60, no. 1, (2010):39–59. 4.) G. Biesta, "The Ignorant Citizen: Mouffe, Rancière, and the Subject of Democratic Education" *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 30:1 (2011): 141-153. 5.) Alex Means extends Rancière's notion of the ignorant schoolmaster to the idea of democratic citizenship. In particular, he was interested with the link between intellectual emancipation and democratic citizenship. See Alex Means, "Jacques Rancière, Education and the Art of Citizenship", *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies* 33, no. 1 (2011): 28-47.

key concern in the implementation of a republican model. The latest discussions on education immediately began following the 1968 student-led revolt. This political unrest prompted a critique of institutions and dominant structures in society as well as a questioning of the relationship between dominant institutions and individuals.

When *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* was published in 1987, there was a clamor for pedagogical reforms in France; education was once again the focus of the debate just like in the 1960s.<sup>341</sup> There was an attempt from the newly elected socialist government to implement pedagogical reforms in education. Two major figures who came to the forefront of this political move were Alain Savary and Jean-Pierre Chevènement. Savary and Chevènement had contrasting ideas about how to reform the educational system. Both politicians wanted to make education accessible to all and not restrict it to the traditional elites, but they propounded their respective approaches in opposite positions. Savary's pedagogical reforms were focused on simplifying the curriculum in order to admit more students in higher institutions of learning. Chevènement, on the other hand, focused his attention on technological modernization and remained steadfast in arguing that the strict standards of the existing curriculum should be maintained. He invited Jean-Claude Milner for a dialogue to reinforce his position and reject Savary's reforms. Milner, a former Maoist activist like Rancière and now a republican himself like Chevènement, believed that the role of education is the formation of "whole persons." This, for him, entails strengthening the pedagogic authority of the teacher whose task is educating students by "transmitting" knowledge to them.<sup>342</sup> The gap between the teacher and the student is the very thing that creates the desire to know in the latter. Inequality therefore should not be abolished by making education accessible to everyone

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<sup>341</sup> For a history of the debates on education in the 1980s, see 1.) John S. Ambler, "Constraints of Policy Innovation in Education Thatcher's Britain and Mitterand's France" in *Education in France Community and Change in the Mitterand yrs. 1981-1995* ed. Anne Corbett and Bob Moon Routledge: London and New York, 1996. 93-118. 2.) Kristin Ross, "Rancière and the Practice of Equality", *Social Text* no. 29, (Duke University Press, 1991) 57-71. doi:10.2307/466299.

<sup>342</sup> Kristin Ross, "Translator's Introduction in Jacques Rancière," *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, translated and introduced by Kristin Ross, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), xiv.

through reforms in pedagogy because the measure of equality in schooling pertains to the transmission of the same knowledge to every student.

In reply to this debate, albeit not directly, Rancière wrote *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* as an intervention in pedagogy. He responded to theorists who presuppose inequality such as Milner<sup>343</sup> and Bourdieu (another highly influential participant in the debate) by discussing the life and works of an obscure teacher in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Joseph Jacotot. Rancière mentioned neither Bourdieu nor Milner in the text, but it was obvious that his notion of radical equality was the antithesis to the structure of social inequality Bourdieu characterizes to be the nature of the French educational system. In this discussion about Jacotot, the ‘will’ as a fundamental element of subjectivity was highlighted to substantiate the important point that emancipation is not necessarily determined by the mastery of scientific knowledge but the mastery of the self.

Bourdieu’s critical sociology was highly influential in the 1960s and 80s debates on pedagogy as a major intellectual authority. Rancière identified his theorization of social inequality as creating a form of rationalizing of inequality and furthering the gap between the intellectual and the “poor”, rather than leading the latter to emancipation, which was its intended goal. As we will see in *The Philosopher and his Poor*, Rancière’s point is that sociology’s effort to explain the structures of social domination continuously recreates a gap between real people and the experts. Bourdieu’s method directly touches on Rancière’s problem of the relation between those who possess knowledge and those who do not—a question of pedagogy that is also political. Thus, it is necessary to have an overview of Bourdieu’s work on the sociology of education to understand Rancière’s move of tackling politics from the entry point of pedagogy.

## **Bourdieu’s Sociology**

One of the most influential voices in the education debate in the 1960s was the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s structuralist analysis of the struggle between the social classes,

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<sup>343</sup> Jean-Claude Milner, *De L’école*, le Seuil, 1984.



supported by data drawn from surveys and interviews on everyday people's cultural preferences during the 1960s, provided an influential explanation of the workings of society during that time. In 1964, prior to the massive uprisings that paralyzed France for months, Bourdieu and his colleague Jean-Claude Passeron published a book that initiated long and intense debates on the education system, i.e., *Les Héritiers (The Inheritors)*. The book focused on a study of production and reproduction of cultural privileges among social classes and groups. It identified pedagogic action—most evident in educational institutions such as the University—as responsible for the proliferation of social inequalities. In general, Bourdieu's main preoccupation was a structuralist reading of society where social structures are characterized by a struggle between classes—to mark their positions within a social field constituted through strict hierarchies. These attempts at securing one's place within such a hierarchical field, in turn, entrench positions of domination and being-dominated. One of the most important ways through which domination takes place is by education. The dominant establish their domination notably by valorizing those forms of theoretical and practical intelligence and knowledge to which the members of their own class have direct access, as opposed to members of other classes.

Because of this, the education system, in fact, produces the very inequality that is supposed to be measured objectively through neutral measurements by educational tests. The system thus pretends to measure objectively the unequal capacities and status of non privileged students, when it is itself responsible for creating them in the first place. Consequently, the dominated suffer what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence<sup>344</sup> from those who are above them in the hierarchy. What makes this power struggle even worse is that the dominated are not aware of the structure of oppression:

The weight of cultural heredity is such it is here possible to possess exclusively without even having to exclude others, since everything takes place as if the only people excluded were those who excluded themselves... These determinisms do not

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<sup>344</sup> Symbolic violence is a famous concept in the work of Bourdieu which pertains to the inability of subjects to recognize structures of hierarchy that dominate social life because these structures of domination are well entrenched in society, which thus legitimizes and justifies them. See Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Trans. Richard Nice. (London: Sage Publications, 1990.)

need to be consciously perceived in order to force subjects to take their decisions in terms of them, in other words, in terms of the *objective future* of their social category.<sup>345</sup>

Thus the legitimacy authority of the school system can multiply social inequalities because the most disadvantaged classes, too conscious of their destiny and too unconscious of the ways in which it is brought about, thereby help to bring it on themselves.<sup>346</sup>

Such passages articulate some of the key ideas Rancière have always rejected: the mystification of the subjects and their incapacity to escape domination by an imposed structure because of the structure that produces mystification.

The publication of *Les Héritiers* (*The Inheritors*) was followed by *La Reproduction* in 1970 (*Reproductions*) and *La Distinction* in 1979 (*Distinctions*). In these studies, Bourdieu developed and expanded his earlier arguments and further amplified his criticism of the French education system as he proposed a view of society that strongly reaffirmed the vision of modern society as organized in class division, but emphasized the cultural and pedagogic dimensions underpinning such a division. For Bourdieu, the main perpetrator of inequality is education.<sup>347</sup> The analysis of education's oppressive mechanism was backed up by empirical data taken from surveys, interviews, and polls conducted among people from different classes. Describing the work he did in *La Reproduction*, Bourdieu wrote:

*Reproduction* sought to propose a model of the social mediations and processes that unbeknownst to the agents of the school system (teachers, students and their parents) and oftentimes against their will- tended to ensure the transmission of cultural capital across generations and to stamp pre-existing differences in inherited cultural capital with the meritocratic seal of academic consecration by virtue of the special symbolic potency of the *title* (credential). Functioning in the manner of a huge classificatory machine that inscribes changes within the purview of the

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<sup>345</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, J.C. Passeron, *The Inheritors French Students and Their Relation to Culture*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), 27. quoted in Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Sociologists* (London and New York: Routledge) 1992, 111.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Tricia Broadfoot, Review article "Reviewed Work(s): Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture" by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron *Comparative Education*, Vol. 14. No. 1 (March 1978)\_75-82.

structure, the school helps to make and to impose the legitimate exclusions that form the basis of the social order.<sup>348</sup>

Bourdieu directly links culture to the process of symbolic violence through *misrecognition* or the incapacity of social groups and classes to recognize the relations of power at play in society.<sup>349</sup> Culture further hides this symbolic violence by entrenching power relations as a legitimate part of society and reproducing them early on through education. These reproductive processes of society are hidden from the individual through a deliberate “misrecognition” of what for sociology is established as a fact; that is, the capacity to make a disinterested judgment is, in fact, the sign of privilege made possible by one’s class belonging. Individuals who are born in the dominating classes have more possibilities to succeed than the children of the dominated classes, not only because they inherit more cultural capital but also they can constantly demonstrate their social superiority in all sorts of contexts, notably in the apparently most benign one, namely cultural consumption. And the education system has played a major role in this mechanism, by valuing precisely those forms of apparently disinterested knowledge that help sort out individual between classes.

To further elaborate the relationship of culture to education and to relations of power in society, Bourdieu published *La Distinction (Distinctions)* in 1979. In this book, he undertakes an analysis of the cultural consumption of the elite versus the masses to show that culture is not objectively outside the individual but is, in fact, embedded in the “habitus” of the subject. In this book, he also studied social structures at the level of individual dispositions and their lifestyles. He claims that the data collected in his sociological research established “the very close

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<sup>348</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *How Schools Help Reproduce the Social Order*, Lecture at College de France, Paris France, July 23, 1988.

<sup>349</sup> Bourdieu 1980 ,198 Bourdieu, P. (1980). Questions de sociologie. Paris: Éditions de Minuit. Cited in Caroline Pelletier, “Emancipation, equality and education: Rancière's critique of Bourdieu and the question of performativity,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 2009, 30:2, 137-150, 139.

relationship linking cultural practices to educational capital (measured by qualifications) and secondarily to social origin (measured by father's occupation); and on the other hand, ...the weight of origin in the practice and preference-explaining system increases as one moves away from the most legitimate areas of culture."<sup>350</sup> In other words, culture creates social classes. The individual's taste preference is, in fact, not entirely subjective but is influenced by one's cultural capital; eventually, cultural consumption entrenches class belonging and, in turn, social hierarchies.

As said, apart from culture, pedagogic work also contributes to the process of symbolic violence. Cultural capital is reproduced and transmitted through pedagogic work via educational institutions such as the university. Pedagogic action that entails the hierarchical relation between a person of authority and a subordinate is responsible for ensuring that a certain hierarchical order is maintained in society by transmitting knowledge to the 'chosen' few who have passed its selection process. However, it is itself the culprit for the uneven distribution of cultural capital among social classes as it imposes a selection process of who could be accepted into the universities. In this selection process, the cultural capital available to the dominating class already puts them in an advantageous position as the values upheld by the university are values that they are familiar with and they can respond to. This logic of domination manifests in society and is further intensified in the exclusion of the working class youths who do not possess the cultural and the economic capital to climb up the ladder of the social class. Thus, the dominated are kept excluded from cultural capital, and the social boundaries between classes are further solidified through education.

Despite its strongly critical intentions toward existing society, this view of the oppressive dynamics between social agents has a serious negative implication for politics from Rancière's point of view. The consequence of Bourdieu's sociology is to doom those in the lower class into a state of incapacity, rather than emancipating them. Rancière therefore strongly criticized

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<sup>350</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice with a new Introduction by Tony Bennett (London and New York: Routledge), 2010. 5

Bourdieu's sociology as a theory that is founded on the mystification of subjects in favor of whom it developed its critical program. Rancière's problem with Bourdieu could be traced to how the latter's theory, i.e., how conventional pedagogy monopolizes the transmission of knowledge as the sole task of the schoolmaster, intensifies the inequalities between the classes and makes it impossible for the poor to get out of their mystification. The discussion that follows is a reconstruction of Rancière's critique of Bourdieu in order for us to see the main problems Rancière identified in Bourdieu's sociology and how he tried to address them in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

### **Rancière's Critique of Bourdieu**

In 1983, just after the publication of *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière wrote another book (i.e., *The Philosopher and his Poor*) to challenge the role of philosophy and philosophers as he asked the questions: "what assigns philosophers to their specific places? And what happens when those who are not assigned to think, assume the position of the thinker?"<sup>351</sup> *The Philosopher and his Poor* was focused on the critique of master thinkers such as Plato, Marx, Sartre, and Bourdieu as thinkers committing the same 'sin' of his intellectual mentor, Althusser, that is, declaring the masses as inherently mystified and incapable of seeing their own situation and therefore lacking the agency to emancipate themselves.<sup>352</sup> It is no accident that Rancière devotes a whole chapter of this book as well as another article "The Ethics of Sociology (1984)"<sup>353</sup> to a critique of Bourdieu's sociology.

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<sup>351</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, edited and introduced by Andrew Parker, translated by John Drury, Corrine Oster, and Andrew Parker, (Durham and London: Duke University Press), 2004.

<sup>352</sup> For a discussion on Rancière's critique of Bourdieu and the parallelisms between the two philosophers See : 1.) Caroline Pelletier (2009) Emancipation, equality and education: Rancière's critique of Bourdieu and the question of performativity, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 30:2, 137-150. 2.) Caroline Pelletier "Rancière and the poetics of the social sciences", *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 32, no.3, (2009) 267-284.

<sup>353</sup> Jacques Rancière et. al. *L'empire du Sociologie*, Paris Découverte, 1984 from an anthology of texts published by the same group responsible for *Logical Revolts* in Jacques Rancière, *The Intellectual and His People. Staging the People* vol. 2 trans by. David Fernbach (London and New York: Verso) 2012. 144-170.

Rancière's criticism of Bourdieu can be understood on four levels. First, on the epistemological level, Rancière criticizes Bourdieu's move to replace philosophy with the science of sociology. He points to the pretensions of sociology as a science that relies on statistical tools and data drawn from its subjects.

In place of the doxa, there will be a science of rankings setting individuals in their proper places and reproduced in their judgments.<sup>354</sup>

This scientific project presents a classic figure: the young science wrestling from the old metaphysical empire one or another of its provinces in order to make it the domain of a rigorous practice armed with the instruments and methods suitable for transforming the impotent dream of speculation into positive knowledge.<sup>355</sup>

For *Rancière*, this move to establish sociology as a science that would replace philosophy is an act of replacing a philosopher king with a sociologist king. The position of the thinker in the highest level of the hierarchy is maintained through a relationship with its 'other,' the poor. Rancière describes Bourdieu's sociology as, "The work of an auxiliary, a purveyor of useful "empirical materials" guilty only of wanting to exploit them itself."<sup>356</sup> Bourdieu's model of sociology, similar to philosophy, excludes those who have no time for intellectual pursuit, from seeing the truth behind appearances.

Another major critique by Rancière of Bourdieu's sociology pertains to the latter's projection of a view of society that radically separates the dominating from the dominant, the possessed from the dispossessed, and the poor from the rich. This means that Bourdieu's sociology is built on the assumption of an irreducible inequality among various social classes and groups. For Rancière, Bourdieu describes social hierarchy based on a mythological view of the social. Here, Rancière is referring to the Platonic myth about the division of labor in society where Plato

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<sup>354</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, 166.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid 167.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

asserts that artisans should not be allowed to participate in the affairs of the state because they do not have the time to spare on affairs other than the exercise of their crafts.

Sociological description is first and foremost a mythical tale. This is why the sociologist, while talking to *lycée* teachers, can present them with the representation of his auditorium as the essence of their classes. The description of this unobtainable school is the tale imitating the essence of School. A myth of leisure that recalls the Platonic argument concerning the absence of time.<sup>357</sup>

Bourdieu's assumption of social inequality seems to be asserted as a fact that makes it impossible for the poor to cross over the boundaries established for them in society. According to Rancière, Bourdieu's sociology reifies the division between the classes to the point of leaving no possibility for an individual outside his class. Sociology prescribes an ethos of how people are supposed to know by declaring that the capacity for knowing is dictated by an individual's class. In this sense, for the sociologist, "all pedagogy is symbolic violence, in other words the imposition of the arbitrary...Pedagogic action is arbitrary because it reproduces the culture of a particular class, but also by its very existence, which makes a division in the field of possibilities that is never necessary in itself".<sup>358</sup> Those who are from the higher class and who enjoy the privilege of education will always be the dominant class and those from the lower class, even if they are educated, will always be excluded because the structure of the system is designed to exclude them. The following quote from *The Philosopher and his Poor* sums up this dynamics of alleged sociological demystification and the effect it has on the view of the subjects' opportunities for knowing:

Sociological demystification then produces this result: it recasts the arbitrary as necessity. Where Plato reduced the serious reasons of needs and function to the arbitrariness of the decree excluding artisans from the leisure of thought, sociology will read the philosophical illusion of universal freedom and will refute it by disclosing the difference of ethos that makes the artisan incapable of even acquiring a taste for the philosopher's goods –and even of understanding the language in which their enjoyment is expounded...In disqualifying the philosopher, the sociologist simply took up for this own sake the privilege of those alone who understand the language of the initiated.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>358</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ethics of Sociology*, 159-160.

<sup>359</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Philosopher and his Poor*, 204.

This assumption of inequality between classes in society is directly linked to the third issue Rancière identifies in Bourdieu's sociology. The sociologist's treatment of subjects as objects to be manipulated for the extraction of sociological data demonstrates Bourdieu's implicit and projected contempt for the poor. The method of sociology, which employs a particular gaze toward the poor, is telling of how it thinks lowly of them.

The critique of intellectual mastery as the tool of emancipation has always been one of the main concerns of Rancière. I showed how it had its roots in his first book, *Althusser's Lesson*. Indeed, in this book, Rancière identified Bourdieu's sociology as one of the variants of the kind of elitist theories he was rejecting: "The sociology of misrecognition, the theory of the spectacle and the multiple forms of criticism of consumer or communication society share with Althusserianism the idea that the dominated are dominated because they are unaware of the laws of their domination."<sup>360</sup> This means that for thinkers such as Bourdieu, the political subject's understanding is masked in ideology from which it is impossible to break free unless the avant-garde intellectual enlightens the deluded masses. Rancière ironically describes the situation in the following words: "(the oppressed) are where they are because they don't know where they are. And they don't know why they are where they are because they are where they are."<sup>361</sup> This famous Rancière quote has a version that specifically refers to Bourdieu's theory of the exclusionary character of education based on this idea of a mystified subject. Referring to Bourdieu's view on education, Rancière describes what he calls a tautology: "In other words, they are excluded because they do not know why they are excluded; and they do not know why they are excluded because they are excluded".<sup>362</sup> Thus, Rancière's issue with Bourdieu is primarily linked to the

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<sup>360</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, translated by Emiliano Battista, (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 12. In this quotation Rancière is also referring to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* when he mentioned the theory of the spectacle, and Baudrillard's *Consumer Society*.

<sup>361</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions" in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Gabriel Rockhill, Philip Watts (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009). 275

<sup>362</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Ethics of Sociology", in *Staging the People*. 161.



question of subjectivity inasmuch as the subject is yet again caught up in a web of ignorance where the only way out is through the sociologist who has the sole capacity to see that subjects deliberately misrecognize. This presupposition of the incapacity of the subject becomes even more complicated with the division that it espouses between those who have the cultural capital and those who do not, by virtue of the circumstance of their birth. Trapped in their habitus, there is no possibility to become other than what the circumstances of their birth have assigned to them.

As for the poor, they do not play. Indeed, their habitus discloses to them only the semblance of a game where the anticipated future is not what is possible but simply the impossible: “a social environment” with “its ‘closed doors,’ ‘dead ends’ and ‘limited prospects’” where “the art of assessing likelihoods” cannot euphemize the virtue of necessity.<sup>363</sup>

The sociologist would be, generally, the scientist [savant] and physician of self-denial. By not changing the ranking of the lowly ranked, he would give them “the *possibility* of taking on their habitus without guilt or suffering.”<sup>364</sup>

As if it is not enough to claim that the boundaries between the dominated and the dominant can never be breached, Bourdieu even argues that the cultural capital of the elite is enough to ensure that they will succeed. In the end, intellectual capacities will not matter over cultural capital, and the children of the poor will gain nothing even if they acquire an education similar to the children of the elite. Bourdieuan sociology for Rancière thus played a major role in this obfuscation of the lowly masses and their confinement to a specifically low status in the social hierarchy. Rancière claims that the science of the sociologist “represents those unfortunates who lack the sociability of distinction to represent themselves.” And it is a representation where, “the lowly ranked person is the hostage of science...”<sup>365</sup> This is precisely what Rancière sought to disprove by drawing out the examples of proletarian thinkers such as Gauny, Jacotot, Volquin, and Veret among several others.

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<sup>363</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, 183.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 181.

The fourth critique of Rancière on Bourdieu gathers all the previous criticisms and pertains to sociology's paradox of emancipation. Rancière argues that Bourdieu's critical sociology, which is supposed to lead to emancipation, ends up doing the opposite. Bourdieu is a critical sociologist who analyzes orders of domination in order to emancipate the 'poor' however, he ends up institutionalizing a form of domination.<sup>366</sup> Rancière contends that Bourdieu and Passeron succumbed to a temptation that can be compared to key philosophers such as Marx and Sartre, which he analyzes as a key Platonic prejudice. The direct implication of this view is that rather than liberating those whom they call disadvantaged and marginalized, the theory of misrecognition by Bourdieu and Passeron had the adverse effect of perpetuating the situation of the dominated and denying them the possibility of using any resources they might have acquired themselves for their own emancipation. Rancière explains:

There remained the lowly ranked. We know that they can expect nothing from emancipatory pedagogy... For the lowly ranked, sociology can do no more than explain why philosophers misrecognize the true reasons keeping them in their places... Like the philosopher, the sociologist never promised anyone happiness. Or rather, he has to make a choice. There is no sociological science without the sacrifice of this rational pedagogy promised imprudently for the emancipation of the lowly ranked. Who would blame the sociologist for having judged in good faith that in the long term, his science would be more useful to the lowly ranked than his pedagogy? After all, what liberates is not pedagogy but science.<sup>367</sup>

On this reading, Bourdieu acted as a sociologist king such as Plato's philosopher king in the Republic whose position accords him the sole task of thinking for the whole community. The sociologist is the only one capable of knowing what the common people have misrecognized about themselves. According to Rancière, Bourdieu did exactly what he denounced in the political scientist:

he pretended to address himself to subjects possessing mastery of the question posed in order to arrive at the conclusion that they lack the disposition which gives meaning to the question. He pretended competence in order to demonstrate its

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<sup>366</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Thinking between disciplines: an aesthetics of Knowledge" Translated by Jon Roffe, *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy* 1 2006 1-12.

<sup>367</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, 203 or 180.

absence. The enquiry simply made apparent what the sociologist already knew in elaborating the question, that is to say that the “popular aesthetic” is a simple absence of aesthetics. Or, inversely, that aesthetic judgment is pure distance in relation to the popular ethos.<sup>368</sup>

Sociology ends up doing the very thing that it criticizes in philosophy by prescribing a particular way of knowing exclusive to a science such as itself thereby taking away from the subject it studies the very tools of her own emancipation. In fact, sociology’s scientific method disregards the ways of knowing and the experiences of the subjects who are considered to be suffering from misrecognition. For Rancière, Bourdieu’s methodology goes against the agency of the subject and once again renders this subject incapable of emancipation. The subjects are, in fact, treated as objects to be studied and scrutinized by the special lens of the sociologist.

These four problems Rancière identifies in the sociology of Bourdieu operate on different levels but are strongly linked to each other. The first critique that pertains to sociology’s attempt to establish itself as a science in lieu of philosophy directly leads to how it views society as unequal and divided, which is, in fact, the second issue Rancière points out. Consequently, the legitimization of inequality as part of society leads to sociology’s treatment of its subject, the poor as incapable. Sociology, similar to philosophy, defines its task by establishing the existence of an ‘other’, a ‘poor’ that it needs to emancipate. However, precisely because it posits the dominated subject as being in such a relationship of “need” towards sociological science, it robs the subject of the very capacity that would make it possible for her to emancipate herself.

Rancière attributes the failure of Bourdieu as well as other thinkers of emancipation to their particular treatment of the ‘poor,’ and he proposed that instead of assuming inequality, what if the opposite fact of equality was presupposed? Instead of labeling the subject as mystified and incapable, what would be the result if the subject was able to mobilize his own agency? Instead of emancipation through the possession of knowledge defined from the outside, what will happen

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 271.

if subjects recognize their “will” to emancipate themselves and their capacity to acquire the knowledge required for that?

As Rancière argued that the problem with Bourdieu’s sociology is that it creates a consensus about social inequality through education, he proposed to approach the problem by looking into conventional pedagogy, analyzing teaching and learning to the extent that both embody the logic of inequality, and eventually finding what could possibly be learned through unlearning pedagogy. In fact, Rancière begins from pedagogy to address the problem of equality and inequality, thus remaining consistent with his question on the problem on politics. The second part of this chapter is a reconstruction of the arguments of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, followed by the analysis of the relation between pedagogy and politics.

### **Reconstruction of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster***

The second part of this chapter is a reconstruction of the main arguments of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* in order to present Rancière’s unique contribution to the philosophy of emancipation via his notion of radical equality. The arguments of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* are discussed in relation to the notion of political subjectivity in this period of Rancière’s thought. Moreover, the relationship between political subjectivity and the radical view of the method of equality is given emphasis to highlight a dimension of the political subject that sets apart Rancière’s subject from the political subjects of Bourdieu and Althusser who are suffering from ‘misrecognition’ of the real conditions of their own oppression.

After his deconstruction of the assumptions and methods of Bourdieu’s sociology in *The Philosopher and his Poor*, Rancière addressed the problems he identified in a master-thinker approach to society of which Bourdieu’s work is a major example. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is specifically focused on the problem of pedagogic work as responsible for the perpetuation of social inequality. At the heart of this text is what Rancière describes as “a fundamental inquiry into the meanings of knowledge, teaching and learning; ... a matter of timely philosophical reflection on

the way in which pedagogical logic and social logic bear on each other.”<sup>369</sup> Here, Rancière suggests that political subjects and those who claim to support them should start from the presupposition of equality in order to achieve emancipation. This is, in fact, a direct reply to Bourdieu’s delineation of strict boundaries between social classes and the hierarchical relationship between the pedagogue and the student that is entrenched in society as a whole. Moreover, Rancière proposes in this book his own method of emancipation. Whereas in his previous works from *Althusser’s Lesson* to *The Philosopher and his Poor* he was critiquing a method of emancipation based on inequality, in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière explicitly outlines what he thinks are the necessary elements for social emancipation, particularly the presupposition of equality.

To prove his point about equality, Rancière drew fundamental insights from the works of Joseph Jacotot. For Rancière, Jacotot is an exemplary subject whose method of universal teaching was the exception to a master-thinker approach to society, which argues that only the elite can rule and that the poor is not capable of thinking. Rancière undertakes an inversion of Bourdieu’s as well as other master thinkers’ assumptions and methods as he echoes the fact of equality shown in the work of Jacotot. He was specifically interested in Jacotot’s experiment on the universal method of teaching which, in fact, presupposes equality and how it could possibly be used for emancipation. Rancière’s engagement with the work of Jacotot gives us an understanding of equality as a major dimension of political subjectivity that involves various aspects such as language, translation and will—key concepts that are not emphasized enough in Rancière’s later writings but are fundamental to his notion of political subjectivity. These key ideas also contribute to a method of politics detached from a hierarchical view of the social and allow us to discover an aspect of political subjectivity that may have been silenced by an individual’s default acceptance of social hierarchy. Ultimately, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* provides us the space for reconnecting to a dimension of politics that has been buried by our social practices.

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<sup>369</sup>Jacques Rancière “On Ignorant Schoolmasters,” in Charles Bingham, & G. Biesta (Introduction by Rancière). *Jacques Rancière, Education, Truth, Emancipation*. (London: Continuum), 2010, 1.

## Joseph Jacotot

Joseph Jacotot was born in Dijon, France, in 1770, a period of tumultuous revolutions and upheavals that ended up in the successful overthrow of the monarchy under the reign of Louis XVI. He was a professor of Latin, French literature, and law; a mathematician; a soldier; and a revolutionary educator. Later in his life, he became the pioneer of an emancipatory method of teaching that created a commotion in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when he announced that “one can teach what one doesn’t know.” This method of teaching is unique for its presupposition of the equality of intelligence. Initially, Jacotot’s concern for education was evident in his involvement in the founding of central schools in Dijon where he first experimented on his emancipatory method of teaching. In 1818, because of the Bourbon restoration, Jacotot was forced to move to Belgium where he took the position of professor of French literature at the Flemish speaking University of Louvain.

At Louvain, Jacotot was faced with the challenge of teaching French literature to students who had no knowledge of the French language. Language was a major obstacle because he himself had no knowledge of Flemish and had no means to communicate to his students. Jacotot successfully fulfilled his task by bridging the language barrier between him and his students through the bilingual edition of Fénelon’s *Télémaque*. At first, Jacotot gave his instructions with the help of an interpreter asking the students to go through the pages of *Télémaque* and repeat what they had learned in French over and over again until they could recite the contents of the book. To his surprise, the students were able to accomplish this and eventually became versed on how to read and express themselves in French with the slightest intervention from him. At the end of the lesson, Jacotot still do not speak Flemish, thus verifying the principle that “one can teach what one doesn’t know.”

The experiment at Louvain surprised Jacotot himself who expected “horrendous barbarisms, or maybe a complete inability to perform”<sup>370</sup> from his students. Rancière was not interested in verifying Jacotot’s principle in reality but in exploring what could unfold once this equality of intelligence is presupposed. As Rancière explains; “But our problem isn’t proving that all intelligence is equal. It’s seeing what can be done under that presupposition.”<sup>371</sup> Rather than providing an explanation of the dynamics of equality and inequality in society, as Bourdieu did in his works, Rancière was interested in the possibilities that accompany the presupposition of the equality of intelligence. In particular, he was interested with questions such as “what could equality contribute to emancipation?” and “how would political subjects act if they are reminded of their equal capacity for thinking?” This explains the attention he gave to the figure of Jacotot and to the story of how the latter was able to empower his students and lead them to learn on their own.

### **Jacotot’s Critique of Explication**

In the previous discussion on Bourdieu, I described the dynamics of pedagogic action based on a social hierarchy as a relationship of power between an intellectual master over a student who possesses inferior intelligence. Pedagogic work thrives on this relation of dependence where the student relies on the teacher in order to acquire knowledge and achieve “understanding” of this knowledge. This kind of pedagogic work is composed of a relationship between two intelligences where one is subordinated to the other. Jacotot calls this “stultification.” The student who is likened to a child incapable of knowing, learning, and understanding on her own awaits the explication of the master.

A key concept in stultification is explication. In Jacotot’s account, ‘explication,’ identified as a distinct act of the intelligent schoolmaster, is defined as an act in which the main goal is “to

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<sup>370</sup> J. Jacotot, *Enseignement universel: Langue maternelle*, 6th ed. (1836), p. 448\ *Journal de l’émancipation intellectuelle*, 3 (1835—36): 121. in Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, translated and introduced by Kristin Ross, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.) 2.

<sup>371</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, 46.

disengage the simple elements of learning, and to reconcile their simplicity in principle with the factual simplicity that characterizes young and ignorant minds.”<sup>372</sup> At first, explication pretends to perform the task of transmitting knowledge to students by simplifying the facts for their benefit. This simplification, however, undermines the intelligence of the students as it relies on the assumption of the incapacity, ignorance, and inability of these students to learn by themselves and, in fact, brings them further away from becoming self-determining subjects.

In this regard, explication puts a gap between the master and the student that is only reconcilable by one who understands and has been given the role of making the student understand. “The master’s secret is to know how to recognize the distance between the taught material and the person being instructed, the distance also between learning and understanding. The explicator sets up and abolishes this distance—deploys it and reabsorbs it in the fullness of his speech.”<sup>373</sup> Thus, the presence of the master throws a veil over everything: understanding is what the child cannot do without the explanations of a master—later, of as many masters as there are materials to understand, all presented in a certain progressive order.<sup>374</sup> As the divide between intelligences becomes more palpable, educational institutions produce stultified students who are convinced that only the master’s explication is the source of true knowledge. The result is an internalization of inequality that feeds on the cycle of the student’s dependence on the teacher which, in turn, leads to the paradox of emancipation. For if we continue to rely on another by virtue of this other’s superior intelligence, then the result is not emancipation but its opposite, stultification.

For Rancière, traditional pedagogy is a myth that feeds on the illusory need for explication. It contributes to the formation of stultified subjects, some of whom are engaged in the process of becoming masters themselves who will eventually reproduce the process of stultification. By equating the need to “understand” as the greatest need in terms of knowledge, explication makes

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 6.



a dominated subject out of everyone, hence dividing the world “between the groping animal and the learned little man, between common sense and science.”<sup>375</sup> Rancière describes this perfectly in the following words:

The child who recites under the threat of the rod obeys the rod and that’s all: he will apply his intelligence to something else. But the child who is explained to will devote his intelligence to the work of grieving: to understanding, that is to say, to understanding that he doesn’t understand unless he is explained to. He is no longer submitting to the rod, but rather to a hierarchical world of intelligence.<sup>376</sup>

This submission to a hierarchical world of intelligence works in favor of the mechanism of domination where subjects are taught not to think on their own but only listen to the explication of the master. Because of this, students are made to think that they are not capable of learning on their own while the materials to be studied are deemed as impenetrable without the aid of the superior intelligence of the master. The master explicator or the pedagogue is at the center of this process, and it is against the pedagogue that Rancière posits *the ‘ignorant’ schoolmaster*. As the question of the book revolves around the relationship between knowledge and emancipation, Rancière introduces Joseph Jacotot, the ‘ignorant’ schoolmaster and his universal method of teaching, as the antithetical figure to the master pedagogue.

### **Jacotot’s Universal Method of Teaching**

The story of Jacotot’s intellectual adventure begins with deconstructing the old master’s pedagogy otherwise known as the process of “stultification.” Jacotot, who was a revolutionary republican, believed ardently in the principle of equality. Choosing to be consistent in his works, he drew out the implications of the equality of intelligence by conceptualizing the principles of universal teaching, which is an emancipatory method of teaching that shifts the focus from the master to students and emancipates these students through empowering their will and thus

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

reminding them of their equal capacity for thinking. The method of universal teaching has three main principles, which Jacotot verified in his encounters with his students. The principles of the universal method of teaching are as follows: first, one can teach what one doesn't know; second, everyone has an equal intelligence; and third, everything is in everything or the panecastic philosophy, which is another name for universal teaching.

### **One can teach what one doesn't know**

Prior to his discovery of the method of intellectual emancipation,<sup>377</sup> Jacotot was like any other traditional educator who believed that the task of the teacher is to transmit knowledge to his students. This entails that the professor should have a level of expertise in order to perform his obligation of teaching. The professor, the intellectual master, is a “man of science” whose main task is to explicate the lesson to his students. He legitimizes his position of authority through the possession of knowledge that would serve as ‘a specific and methodical foundation’ which must first be established ‘before the singularities of genius could take flight.’<sup>378</sup> The professor is the primary actor of the pedagogical process because it is through his expertise that the intellect of the students is filled with new knowledge.

While conventional pedagogy has been practicing this method of explication in formal educational institutions, Jacotot's chance experiment led him to the discovery of its antithesis. The master does not necessarily have to know everything in order to teach; in fact, “one can teach what one does not know.” Jacotot, a teacher who had no knowledge of the Flemish language, successfully taught his Flemish students how to read and express themselves in French not by transmitting his knowledge to them but by letting them go through the pages of Fénelon's *Télémaque* on their own. In this particular situation, the teacher was not in a position of mastery of knowledge and yet was able to deliver what was asked from him, not through his sole effort but

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

mobilizing the will of his students. This proved that learning is not solely dependent on the teacher's superior intelligence looming over the students. In fact, the same equal intelligence works in both the teacher and the student.

This principle of universal teaching is fundamental for Jacotot's as well as Rancière's project of emancipation because it dissociates emancipation from mastery of knowledge. It opens an alternative path to knowledge and emancipation that is not strongly associated with the intelligence of a master thinker but in the 'ignorance' of both the teacher and the student. As Rancière asserts in one passage from the book: "But whoever wishes to emancipate must interrogate him (the student) in the manner of men and not in the manner of scholars, in order to be instructed, not to instruct. And that can only be performed by someone who effectively knows no more than the student, who has never made the voyage before him: the ignorant master."<sup>379</sup> This is not a glorification of ignorance but the espousal of an alternative perspective that puts the master and his students on an equal starting point. Ignorance here pertains to a shared absence of a specific knowledge. Following the logic of this passage, the ignorance of the schoolmaster works both to his advantage and that of his students as it puts them on a level plane which allows the master to engage with the students as human beings possessing the same intelligence as himself. Ignorance is a necessary starting point that allows the teacher and the student to open up and learn from each other as human beings capable of thinking. This basic recognition of humanity is the beginning of intellectual emancipation for Jacotot and for Rancière in his footsteps. This is tantamount to the position that equality is a starting point, not a goal. For Jacotot, everyone who participates in the activity of learning should begin from the recognition that everyone is equally capable of thinking and achieving the goals of learning in the process.

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<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 29.

## **Everyone is equal (Equality of Intelligence)**

The logic behind the sociological critique of pedagogy presupposes inequality as the general state of social existence which could be eradicated by making it an object of knowledge. This means that most approaches to the problems of society take the perspective that society must be saved from inequality by approaching the problem scientifically. The issue, however, with this perspective is that it creates the tautology of inequality we studied above in Rancière's critique of Bourdieu. This circle of inequality traps everyone and renders the dominated incapable of emancipation. Jacotot's work demonstrates that equality and inequality are not states but two distinct axioms by which educational training operates.<sup>380</sup> For Jacotot, rather than acknowledging inequality, one must begin with equality as the axiom to be verified.

By the expression 'equality of intelligence,' Rancière enumerates the two dimensions of equality. The first dimension is equality in the capacity to speak. As human beings, we are endowed with the natural capacity to acquire language and express ourselves through this language. All subjects therefore are speaking beings or at least have the inherent capacity to express themselves and communicate with their fellow human beings. This natural capacity is made possible through the second dimension of equality that pertains to the objective materiality of language. Language, which is composed of letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs, is a material reality shared by all speaking beings. These two dimensions of equality, the subjective capacity and its objective materiality help to realize the equal intelligence of all subjects.

### ***Speech and Language***

In the logic of pedagogy, at the very moment the master gives his instructions to students, he has already implicitly recognized the equality of their intelligence. This is because before an individual could perform the command, the master has already assumed that his student will

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<sup>380</sup> Jacques Rancière "On Ignorant Schoolmasters," in Charles Bingham, & G. Biesta (Introduction by Rancière). *Jacques Rancière, Education, Truth, Emancipation*, 5.

understand his words. For Rancière, “There is an equality of speaking beings that comes before the relation of inequality, one that sets the stage for inequality’s very existence.”<sup>381</sup> Rancière performs an inversion of the common hierarchy between the teacher and the student showing that the root of inequality is, in fact, equality. The verification of this implicit equality of intelligence is in the use of speech.

The principle of the equality of intelligence is verified by the comparison with the manner through which one learns language. In the same manner that everyone has the capacity to learn a language (one’s mother tongue) without the explicit help or indeed the direct pedagogical intervention of anybody, everyone is capable of learning and understanding on their own. Speech, a distinct property of human beings and a result of their intelligence, is composed of two processes, namely understanding and expression. Both activities are, for Rancière, the result of a commonly shared capacity he calls ‘translation,’ following Jacotot. This capacity to “translate,” is precisely what Jacotot made his students realize in his experiment:

Without thinking about it, he had made them discover this thing that he discovered with them: that all sentences, and consequently all the intelligences that produce them, are of the same nature. Understanding is never more than translating, that is, giving the equivalent of a text, but in no way its reason. There is nothing behind the written page, no false bottom that necessitates the work of another intelligence, that of the explicator; no language of the master, no language of the language whose words and sentences are able to speak the reason of the words and sentences of a text.<sup>382</sup>

The activity of translation is an act of the intellect that involves both understanding and the expression of this understanding using one’s own words. At the very moment an individual receives the words of another and processes these words in his intellect, he is performing a similar kind of task as the master himself performed, i.e., arranging words and expression to form a coherent speech. The ignorant schoolmaster, who knows that understanding is nothing more than translation, does not hesitate to give instructions to his students knowing that they are equally

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 9-10.

intelligent and capable. This schoolmaster knows that the students have the capacity, if they will themselves towards it, to discover on their own what they have to learn about language. They can also own language and express themselves through it.

The second dimension of equality is the materiality of language. Language presents a facet of equality that is different from the subjective capacity to speak as it pertains to an objective material which is graspable and available to everyone who is capable of speech. Language, which is external to the subject and is universal inasmuch as everyone uses the same medium to communicate with each other, puts all speaking beings on the same ontological level. As a reality which is shared by everyone, language undermines existing hierarchies because all people, regardless of social status or intellectual capacity can rely on the materiality of language to express themselves.

Language destroys the barrier created by established hierarchies through its concrete reality, e.g., schoolmaster and student. As Rancière writes, “The material ideality of language refutes any opposition between the golden race and the iron race, any hierarchy -even an inverted one-between men devoted to manual work and men destined to the exercise of thought. Any work of language is understood or executed the same way.”<sup>383</sup> Going back to the example of Jacotot and his students, what allowed the students to learn from a teacher who does not speak their language is the fact that the text of Fénelon uses the material reality of words, letters, and sentences, which can be grasped by all human beings through the process, in this case, of translation. This assumption directly refers to the principle of the panecastic method, which states that at the heart of all human endeavors, be it the product of manual labor or a work of thought, the same human intelligence is at work. Language is a reality shared between everyone who speaks regardless of whether one is a poet, a carpenter, or a schoolmaster. By virtue of the fact that individuals speak and use the same medium, at that fundamental level, they are equal.

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 37.

This is the essential lesson Jacotot taught his students. Language can be learned precisely because it is material, and there is equality of intelligence in the fact that we all have access to and share the same tangible medium of expression. There is in language a concrete reality that can be used and re-used by anyone. Indeed Rancière shows how Jacotot insisted particularly on this ability of a shared material to establish the equality of intelligence:

The student must be able to talk about everything he learns- the forms of the letters, the placement or endings of words, the images, the reasoning, the characters' feelings, the moral lessons - to say what he sees, what he thinks about it, what he makes of it. There was only one rule: he must be able to show in the book, the materiality of everything he says. He will be asked to write compositions and perform improvisations under the same conditions: he must use the words and turns of phrases in the book to construct his sentences; he must show, in the book, the facts on which his reasoning is based. In short, the master must be able to verify in the book, the materiality of everything the students say.<sup>384</sup>

The bilingual translation of Fénelon's *Télémaque* presented the students with a material through which they were able to access the universe of French literature. Jacotot was well-acquainted with the fact that the materiality of language is a given which could be grasped by all speaking beings. From the pedagogical experiment of Jacotot, we learn that language is universal and that it is a material objective reality which could be grasped by everyone, hence enables a verification of equality. Such verification of the materiality of language activated the will of the students to learn on their own and cut their tie of dependence to the schoolmaster.

### **Everything is in everything**

When Jacotot engaged his students in his experimental pedagogy, he also realized that at the heart of equality is the fundamental principle that 'everything is in everything.' This means that all manifestations of human intelligences are products of the activity of translation performed by human intellects. Being manifestations of the same intelligence, there is always a possible circulation and communication among all outputs or works of human intelligence that, in turn,

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid., 20.

make it available to the translation of anyone. Equality is verified through equal access to a shared material, which is itself only the product of shareable human knowledge. Anyone can translate in his own use of language using his own intellect, the universally available products of human intelligence.

The shared material reality of the products of human intelligence bridges the gap between intelligences. This was exactly the case with the bilingual translation of Fénelon's *Télémaque* in Jacotot's experiment. The content of the book, which is a product of its author's intellect, was made available to Jacotot's students who eventually were able to grasp its contents even without the explication of their teacher. Aside from Jacotot's students, Rancière also draws from a number of examples where individuals acquire knowledge through their own effort in order to prove that all outputs of human knowledge can be compared with and related to each other. Rancière describes the process of learning one's first language. What makes it possible for children to learn without instruction but only through their own observations is the fact that language is a concrete material reality accessible to everyone. Children who possess an intellect of their own can pay attention to language and will themselves to speak their mind. The accessibility of the contents of knowledge makes it possible for subjects to will themselves toward claiming their right to speak. This principle directly goes against Bourdieu's idea that only those with cultural capital have access to knowledge. Through this third principle of universal teaching, Rancière counters Althusser and Bourdieu's argument that political subjects are suffering from a misrecognition of the conditions of their own oppression.

For Rancière, the tautology of the principle that everything is contained in everything empowers the will to recognize its own capacity to act in which the goal of understanding and expression is the goal of connecting to the intelligence of the other. In another example about a poor father teaching his son, Rancière describes how the child's will is moved to seek the intelligence of the author in a book he was reading. The emphasis on the 'poor' father as the ignorant teacher and the son as his seeking student demonstrates that there is no hierarchy in terms



of intelligence because all outputs of human knowledge can be communicated, compared, and related to each other. The same intelligence is at work in the mind of a schoolmaster, a book written by a genius, or the glove maker from Grenoble.<sup>385</sup> As Rancière argues, “That reciprocity is the heart of the emancipatory method, the principle of a new philosophy that the Founder, by joining together two Greek words, baptized ‘panecastic,’ because it looks for the totality of human intelligence in each intellectual manifestation.”<sup>386</sup> The principle that everything is in everything puts the political subject in a position to have the capacity to recognize his capacity of knowing on his own by acknowledging that there are no barriers to what one can know. Thus, individuals can know because all knowledge is a product of the same equal intelligence.

### **Pedagogy and Politics**

From a discussion of the main ideas of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, I will now proceed to the analysis of the relationship between pedagogy and politics in this seminal work. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, Rancière’s main interest is not pedagogy but politics. He developed his discussion of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* in conjunction with his method of equality in order to emphasize on the point that what is classically identified as education perceived as a tool for emancipation can often presuppose inequality and as a consequence remove the subject further away from her agency. Moreover, emancipation becomes elusive especially if pedagogies that appear on the surface to be emancipatory end up entrenching hierarchical structures of domination. Charles Barbour in “Militants of Truth, Communities of Equality: Badiou and the Ignorant Schoolmaster”, insightfully claims that “according to Rancière, pedagogy has followed politics like a dark shadow, marking even the most egalitarian social projects with an assumption of intellectual inequality, or a hierarchy between philosophers and scientists on the one hand and

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid, 39.

those they hope to emancipate on the other.”<sup>387</sup> Following this logic of thought, pedagogy therefore is inseparable from politics because it is through education that political subjects learn fundamental ways of thinking and understanding the world. For instance, one of the ways through which colonizers successfully dominate a nation is by imposing an educational system that teaches their colonial subjects how to perceive and think of their social realities, of course with the implicit assumption of these subjects cannot think on their own. Considering the weight of this essential link between pedagogy and politics, it is no surprise that Rancière pays much attention to pedagogy.

In fact, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* contains what Yves Citton describes as Rancière’s most fundamental and obstinate political assertion namely, “the definition of politics as the verification of the equality of intelligence”<sup>388</sup> Furthermore, in the chapter of the book, Rancière key concepts, he skillfully synthesized the political implications of Jacotot’s pedagogy in three levels; 1) on the question of the political use of expertise which pertains to the critique of explication, Rancière shows the inequality of the explanatory model inherited from the classical philosophies of the Platonic tradition. He denounces thinkers who let their expert knowledge silence the claims of the political subject, 2) through Jacotot’s universal method of thinking, Rancière implicitly emphasized the idea of the empowerment of the political agent and 3) through the process of subjectivation, democratic politics revolves around the practical verification of the presupposition of the equality of intelligence.<sup>389</sup> Rancière uses Jacotot’s discovery of universal intellectual emancipation to assert an idea of emancipation presupposed by equality. In doing so, he proposes a notion of emancipation available to everyone by showing that any political subject who emancipates herself intellectually is also capable of emancipating herself politically. In addition

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<sup>387</sup> Charles Andrew Barbour, *Militants of Truth, Communities of Equality: Badiou and the Ignorant Schoolmaster*, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42 no. 2, (2010): 251-263, 259-260.

<sup>388</sup> Yves Citton, “The Ignorant Schoomaster: Knowledge and Authority” in *Jacques Rancière, Key Concepts*, ed by Jean-Philippe Deranty, (UK: Acumen), 2010, 25-37.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

to these three lessons on pedagogy and politics that Citton enumerated, I will be discussing further three main concepts (translation, will and equality) which are necessary for political subjectivation.

## Translation

The first lesson for politics that can be taken from Rancière's reconstruction of Jacotot is in relation to translation.<sup>390</sup> Translation is an activity of the intellect that is manifested by taking in and re-expressing another's idea through one's own words, thereby creating one's own idea. Jacotot's emphasis on translation has different dimensions which in turn have strong implications for politics. The most fundamental political aspect of translation and in fact that which concretely demonstrates the strong relationship between pedagogy and politics is that, translation verifies that 'anyone can think'.

When the subject receives an object of knowledge, she first translates her understanding of this knowledge to herself. This inner translation is a communicative act that happens internally within oneself where subjects put into their own thoughts what they think, feel and perceive for the purpose of understanding for themselves. Translation therefore shows us that anyone can think and in fact, the act of translation itself is an act of thinking. Whereas the master explicator puts emphasis on simplifying and breaking down ideas in order to be understood by what he perceives as inferior intelligences, Jacotot realizes with his students that understanding is nothing more than translating, which implies the power of intelligence doing the translating. In particular, the process of learning entails listening, observing, and comparing in order to understand the similarities and

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<sup>390</sup> Katharina Clausius argues that translation represents a sustained and specific focus in Rancière's political-aesthetic framework, one that scholarship has so far overlooked. See Katharina Clausius "Translation – Politics" *Philosophy Today* 61, no. 1 (2017):249-266 The same contention can be found in the work of Samuel Chambers who said that it is one of the concepts in Rancière's work which is under examined. Following up on this hint, I wish to provide a modest attempt of drawing out the political implications of Rancière's idea of explication in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* as response to critics that he does not propose an alternative theory of politics. The concept of translation has a lot to offer for politics.

differences between letters, words, expressions, and later on thoughts, and then re-expressing this understanding to oneself using one's own language.

This first dimension of translation is political precisely because it proves that anyone can think on their own. And this in turn contradicts Bourdieu and thinkers who have the tendency to reify social classes into orders of discourse and practice. Against, those who perceive the uneducated, the poor and the workers as beasts who are incapable of grasping higher forms of knowledge, Rancière strongly argues that anyone who translates can actually think. Indeed, this argument goes against Bourdieu's notion of misrecognition which posits that "the ignorant" subjects are incapable of grasping the hidden meanings within social practices in society because they do not have access to such that knowledge due the limitations set by their lack of social capital.<sup>391</sup> This is a strong political claim that goes against the popular position that politics is exclusive to those who are capable of thinking, those who are educated and those who have the time to participate in political discourse.

The second aspect of translation that has important implications for politics is that, it demonstrates that in as much as anyone can think, it also follows that anyone can speak. When the subject who hears the linguistic expression of the first speaker, translates into her own language what she heard from the first speaker and then later on replies back, this means that the hearer can 'translate to' or talk back, or express back her own thoughts to someone else using her own words. Thus an individual who replies through her own language, to the first speaker by translating the words of the first speaker, whether by borrowing another language like what proletarians did in their writings or inventing a new language to express one's thoughts, is a subject who can think like anyone else. When students translate the thoughts of others using their own words, they were in fact verifying their equality of intelligence. Describing his students, Jacotot writes, "If they had understood the language by learning Fénelon, it wasn't simply through the gymnastics of comparing the page on the left with the page on the right. It isn't the aptitude for changing columns

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<sup>391</sup> Pelletier, "Emancipation, Equality and Education," 139.

that counts, but rather the capacity to say what one thinks in the words of others.”<sup>392</sup> ‘The capacity to say what one thinks in the words of others’ verifies the fact of the equality of intelligence. This second dimension is political because it shows that the equality of intelligence is made possible by the translation of one’s own thoughts using the words of others. If individuals who are taught by society to be incapable of communicating because their language is too coarse, inferior or not fit for intellectual discourse, suddenly speaks or writes using the very language of poets, writers and philosophers who were once considered to be beyond them, it means that they are in fact capable of speaking for themselves. If blacksmiths and carpenters whose bodies are exhausted from work can write about their dreams of becoming painters and or even insists on being philosophers, this means that they are able to translate their understanding of bourgeois artists and poets through their own language and think of themselves equal to these poets and painters. Translation is a political activity because it demonstrates that anyone can speak back using one’s own language to an ‘other’ and not just to oneself.

In both of these processes, -thinking and speaking- translation summons the ‘will’ to preside over the activity of confronting its object of knowledge. Rancière states that, ‘Understanding is ...the power of translation that makes one speaker confront another.’<sup>393</sup> Thus, this brings us to the third political dimension of translation, which is the fact that anyone who can think and speak can participate. The moment of speech is the moment of self-determination when subjects finally realize on their own what they are capable of doing by themselves. This third dimension of translation is the moment when the active will, fully aware of itself, declares that it wants to speak and that it “can” indeed speak, which means that it possesses the capacity to speak and therefore to think, and to know and understand what anyone else could know and understand. In the process of understanding an object of knowledge, for instance the ideas of another individual, subjects initially rely more on the will than the intellect. This is evident in the effort of

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<sup>393</sup> Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 64.

translating and counter-translating words into, thoughts into words, and words into thoughts again.<sup>394</sup> Rancière puts the emphasis on the role of the will as that which provides the impetus for individuals to understand each other's expression and thoughts. Moreover, he highlights the force of the will as the capacity that could move toward a goal that it set for itself. In as much as it is difficult to communicate and understand, the will keeps on providing the thrust in order for the intellect to understand and for the subject to express these thoughts.

Translation therefore has a political consequence that contributes to the formation of the subject because the moment the subject speaks; she is in fact doing something. In this moment, she claims a space of participation that she rightfully owns, thereby demonstrating the necessity to posit the equal participation of everyone and contest her exclusion. This goes against Bourdieu and many other thinkers who argued that people in the lower class are mystified and lacks agency. Rancière emphasized on the creative power and the agency of the political subject to participate in politics and create itself as a subject through the act of translation. Empowerment of the subject's agency should not however be mistaken as unconditioned free will because for Rancière as Citton succinctly describes, "Politics consists in producing or in exploiting the practical conditions (context, situation, structural framework) that will solicit the agent's will to use the power at his disposal. When Rancière presents politics as a process of subjectivation, he undermines in advance any appeal to a will that would be unconditioned, that is "free" to "just do" something if only the agent made "the right choice".<sup>395</sup> The will is an important component of the process of subjectivity because it empowers the subject to rediscover an agency and a capacity that is already within itself. Such active willing however happens within a given socio-historical condition that allows the subject to be a political subject. Translation presupposes the existence of a will which any moment can emerge and start the process of political subjectivation.

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

<sup>395</sup> Yves Citton, "The Ignorant Schoomaster: Knowledge and Authority" 31.

The political implications of translation do not end in asserting one's agency through participation. Speaking also shatters boundaries, exclusions and hierarchies, which have been prescribed by society. Through the ability to speak and express their own understanding, the subjects can show that knowledge is not exclusive to a group of people and is thus equally available to anyone. Translation therefore becomes a political gesture as it reveals that hierarchies based on knowledge are wrong because equality is a fact that could be verified by anyone who would will himself to access knowledge. Contrary to the claims of Bourdieu that the possession of cultural capital is exclusive to those who belong to the privileged class of society, Rancière teaches us through the activity of translation that knowledge is in principle available to all. In the old method of pedagogy where a hierarchical relation between a superior and a subordinate is in the limelight, the relationship between the teacher and the student is one-dimensional—between higher and lower intelligences. In Jacotot's method of universal teaching, there is a shift in this dynamics, and an additional layer emerges. The link between the master and the student becomes a relationship of 'will to will,' while the connection of intelligence is refocused to the relationship between the student and the material to be learned, in the case of Jacotot's students, Fénelon's *Télémaque*. Here, the student and teacher are equal because both of their will to understand are directed toward the same material object to be learned. Rancière writes:

Thought is not told *in truth*: it is expressed *in veracity*. It is divided, it is told, it is translated for someone else, who will make of it another tale, another translation, on one condition: the will to communicate, the will to figure out what the other is thinking, and this under no guarantee beyond this narration, no universal dictionary to dictate what must be understood. Will figures out will. It is in this common effort that the definition of man as *a will served by an intelligence* takes on its meaning.<sup>396</sup>

And precisely because it is a process involving one's subjective capacity to think and express ideas, there is no such thing as a universal translation for a single object of knowledge. Translation reveals the wrongness of hierarchies of knowledge based on virtues and norms which in fact have no basis. If the students of Jacotot learned the contents of Fénelon on their own this is

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<sup>396</sup> Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 64.

because the contents of the book are easily available to everyone through translation. In addition to this is the power of the will which moves the subject's intelligence. Instead of a vertical hierarchical relationship between objects of knowledge and the subject who is the knower, *Rancière* proposes a horizontal, equal relationship between the two that is made possible by everyone's capacity to translate. With translation, all knowledge becomes available to 'anyone', regardless of class and upbringing.

Another dimension of translation which in fact sets Rancière apart from other political thinkers of his time, is that his idea of translation leads to an incredible vision of language as that which could possibly unite all political subjects. In *Rancière's* work we can sense a belief in the implicit universality of communication that can bring political subjects together in dialogue. Rancière is an amazing thinker because despite the fact that his theory of politics is close to structuralism and post-structuralism, which have tendencies to be deconstructive and focused on the negative aspects of language, he regards communication as the setting of a common stage where everyone is equally present. There are no qualifications and requirements of who is qualified to speak. Communication is 'communication with' which means that language is a material tool with a specific purpose of establishing a common ground for everyone. It is a productive action which *Rancière* describes in the following passage, "The virtue of our intelligence is less in knowing than in doing. Knowing is nothing, *doing* is everything. But this doing is fundamentally an act of communication. And, for that, '*speaking* is the best proof of the capacity to do whatever it is.'"<sup>397</sup> Speaking, for Rancière, is not a mere act of stating and narrating; it is a decisive moment when the subject demands acknowledgment through speech and through the demonstration of the capacity to speak, that is, to understand and express meaningfully. This, for Rancière, is a truth verified in the examples he draws from history such as the speech at the Aventine Hill, the poetry of Gauny, up and until the pedagogical adventures of Jacotot with his students. Speech, which is the subjective act of demanding to be heard, is not a simple action of

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 65.



narrating; it is the summoning of the will to let the world know one's thoughts and to engage others in communication and later on generate emancipation. Rancière uses the metaphor of poetry to describe the fundamental use of language as a performative gesture or a tool which shows the equality of intelligence and which in turn invites everyone to participate in politics. Rancière explains:

In the act of speaking, man doesn't transmit his knowledge, he makes poetry; he translates and invites others to do the same. He communicates as an artisan; as a person who handles words like tools. Man communicates with man through the works of his hands just as through the words of his speech: "When man acts on matter, the body's adventures become the story of the mind's adventures."<sup>398</sup>

This is a very rich quote which gives us a hint why Jacotot's materialistic theory of language is really the condition for Rancière's revolutionary theory of the equality of intelligence. The different dimensions of translation which are all political and which I have enumerated and described above demonstrates how translation is not a simple activity of thinking and speaking but is in fact draws the foundation for *Rancière's* equality of intelligence that is a necessary component of his theory of emancipation. Through translation, we are able to recognize that anyone can think and if anyone can think this means that anyone can also speak. Speaking is not only a demonstration of the capacity to think but it also shows us that intelligence is not brought about by privilege but by the will which is already a given in everyone. Speaking shatters all hierarchies that originally prevented the subject from participation in politics and more importantly it opens and sets the stage for everyone to participate.

Indeed, from the point of view of communication and translation, there is no difference between the poetry of Racine and that of Gauny the carpenter. Racine writes with the assumption that his reader will understand his works because they both use the same material which is language. Gauny's insistence to write poetry in the tradition of the great poets and Jacotot's accomplishment of teaching French through Fénelon's *Télémaque* are instances that display how

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 65.

translation becomes the capacity to will oneself ‘to do’ and to use language as a material tool to invite everyone to a dialogue. Rancière uses the metaphor of speaking as “*poiesis*” or as a tool which is similar to the tool of the carpenter. In the same manner that the poet wields his pen and scribble the words that invite his reader to see the world through his perception, or the carpenter who uses his tool to create a table which can bring together everyone who uses the table, we are brought together by language.

Such a political dimensions of translation highlighted by Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is often glossed over by several of his interpreters. While there is recognition of the act of speaking and the moment of speech as the act of political subjectivation, translation as a tool of language which can provide an avenue for dialogue is often not emphasized. The idea of translation is an important component of Rancière’s lesson on pedagogy because the verification of equality happens the moment that the idea of intelligence as “willing” is also emphasized. The capacity to translate removes knowledge from the hierarchical relation of power and returns it to the individual political subject who, inasmuch as he is capable of thinking, is also capable of doing.

## **Will**

By challenging the method of the old pedagogy and presupposing the equality of intelligence, Rancière and Jacotot destroy the old pedagogy and make way for the recognition of an individual’s intellectual capacity as moved by the will. This shift of focus strips the intellectual schoolmaster of his conventional role of transmitting knowledge as his role becomes that of empowering the will of students and reminding them that they are capable of learning through their own effort. Rancière teaches his students the lesson that prior to the mastery of any kind of knowledge, the most basic act of the subject is paying attention. “Attention is the way through which intelligence proceeds under the great constraint of the will.”<sup>399</sup> Paying attention is important

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid

for the recognition of another principle of universal teaching: *Everything is in everything* or the idea that at the heart of all human labor is the same equal intelligence. Rancière calls this principle a “tautology of power” because in the recognition that one is already in possession of an intelligence necessary for understanding, the link between the master and the student is cut off. The student comes to the realization that he is independent of the master. Again, the first step toward the recognition of this tautology is the activation of the “will” to pay attention.

Here, Rancière shifts from pedagogy to politics. The will’s purpose is not solely for learning but for accessing a greater capacity of the subject “to do” and, in fact, to emancipate herself. In order for emancipation to take place, the subject must be made to realize that she is capable of having it. Everything Rancière has been discussing from the critique of explication to the emphasis on the role of the will in learning is designed to make the subject realize her own capacity. “The problem is to reveal an intelligence to itself.”<sup>400</sup> The will therefore is the seat of the actual realisation of equality in the two senses of the word, because it is precisely this “will” that directs the intelligence toward the recognition of itself. As the will is responsible for directing the intelligence toward the subject’s recognition of her own capacity, what follows is movement toward action. The power of the will provides the motivation for an individual to exercise her capacity. Rancière describes the will as “self-reflection by the reasonable being who knows himself in the act...The reasonable being is first of all a being who knows his power, who doesn’t lie to himself about it.”<sup>401</sup>

Thus we can surmise that as Rancière veered away from the definition of intelligence as the possession of scientific knowledge and moved to the idea of a will served by intelligence, he also transferred the authority of emancipation from the avant-garde intellectual back to the political subjects. Rancière’s emancipated subject is someone who possesses self-knowledge, who is aware of her capacity of “willing”, and who makes use of that power. The shift from intelligence to will

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 57.

is an allusion to Descartes and the reversal of the formula, *I think therefore I am*, to a new one, *I will, therefore I am*. Rancière writes:

It is this fundamental turnaround that the new reversal of the definition of man records: man is a will served by an intelligence. Will is the rational power that must be delivered from the quarrels between the idea-ists and the thing-ists. It is also in this sense that the Cartesian equality of the cogito must be specified. In place of the thinking subject who only knows himself by withdrawing from all the senses and from all bodies, we have a new thinking subject who is aware of himself through the action he exerts on himself as on other bodies.<sup>402</sup>

In this inversion of the Cartesian formula, Rancière emphasizes the power of the will to move individuals toward acting concretely and materially along with other bodies toward emancipation. This will is not an abstract, unlimited or unconditioned freedom to do something but rather a given presupposition which has always been present and embodied by the subject in the moment of politics. The function of the will is to give back to bodies their capacity for action so that they can use it within a given social and historical context. Such move is Rancière's strategy to propose a new method of emancipation based on equality. He needed to disassociate intelligence from the hierarchical relation of lower and higher intelligences and re-establish a relation of will to will (the equal capacity) to make way for the subject's social mobility. He needed to emphasize the will if the ultimate goal is emancipation because it is the will that moves the political subject toward social action. "Will is the power to be moved, to act by its own movement, before being an instance of choice."<sup>403</sup> The will, aside from verifying the equality of intelligence among all individuals, also motivates the subject toward emancipation. That politics is political subjectivation means awakening the will to the possibilities and opportunities that make it possible for new sensibilities to arise.

Jacotot's lesson on pedagogy is essential for Rancière's idea of political emancipation as he argues that, "Universal teaching is above all the universal verification of the similarity of what all

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

emancipated can do, all those who have decided to think of themselves as people just like everyone else.”<sup>404</sup> For Rancière, Jacotot’s lesson on the importance of the “will” in pedagogy is for the self-recognition of an individual’s capacity to act. More than the intellect, it is the will that pushes the subject to move toward emancipation and later on emancipate others through empowering their will and reminding them of their own capacities and the equality of their intelligence with everyone else.

Jacotot believed that intellectual emancipation is universal. Rancière translates this into political emancipation as he proposes that emancipation can often begin with the individual. There is a task given to the emancipated individual that is to emancipate others not intellectually because everyone has equal intelligence. Emancipating others means awakening the “will” of others to act which is exactly what Rancière attempts to do through his book. “Essentially, what an emancipated person can do is be an emancipator: to give not the key to knowledge, but the consciousness of what an intelligence can do when it considers itself equal to any other and considers any other equal to itself.”<sup>405</sup> While Rancière draws so much from Jacotot’s method and from the example of Jacotot himself as an individual, for Rancière, emancipation is not merely universal intellectual emancipation but leads to a chain of effects that does not end in the recognition of the individual’s capacity and equality. Emancipation, for Rancière, is a political action that can ultimately lead to the political emancipation of everyone. The similarity in these two kinds of emancipation is in the positing the capacity of the political subject.

### **Equality and Political Subjectivation**

The difference between Jacotot’s and Rancière’s assumptions lies in the idea of emancipation. Whereas for Jacotot the universal method of teaching is meant only for the intellectual emancipation of the individual, Rancière believes that this method should work for the

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 39.

purpose of the political goal of emancipation. As discussed in the first chapter, politics, for Rancière, is the exercise of equality that involves speaking up and demanding to be recognized as a speaking being. Politics therefore is a verification of equality. Jacotot's important contribution in Rancière's work is in showing that emancipation begins from pedagogy, undermining hierarchies based on alleged natural properties and 'demonstrating' to individuals what they are capable of achieving on their own. The ignorant schoolmaster's method of teaching by means of empowering his students' will is a necessary tool for verifying that political subjects can in fact "will" themselves to speak up and be recognized as speaking beings who are also part of society and deserve to have their own voices heard.

In the last pages of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière makes the direct connection between Jacotot's lesson on pedagogy and the experiences of the proletarians in 19<sup>th</sup> century France, stating that the problem of the proletarians, which was political in nature, was no different from the pedagogical problem of the learned and the powerful:

What was important - the manifestation of liberty- lay elsewhere: in the *equal* art that, in order to support these antagonistic positions, the one translated from the other; in the *esteem* for that power of the intelligence that doesn't cease being exercised at the very heart of rhetorical irrationality; in the *recognition* of what speaking can mean for whoever renounces the pretension of being right and saying the truth at the price of the other's death. To appropriate for oneself that art, to conquer that reason – this was what counted for the proletarians. One must first be a man before being a citizen.<sup>406</sup>

The problem is that of seeking the recognition of equality with those who have declared themselves superior. For Rancière, similar to the proletarians who wanted to be recognized as human beings like their masters, the students of Jacotot also needed to be seen as intellectually capable as their schoolmaster. But to be seen and treated like human beings possessing an intellect and the capacity to express their own thoughts, equality had to be a point of departure, an axiom to be verified. In this verification of equality, speech occupies a central position because it is through it that one can express disagreement over the denial of equality.

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid, 137.

Emancipation is a verification of equality. The process of verifying equality results in political subjectivation or the process of creating political subjects. This is why although, for Jacotot, emancipation is intellectual emancipation, Rancière brings it further into the realm of politics. Once an individual realizes that she could differentiate herself from other existing forms of identification politics as equal and democratic is also verified. This is what Rancière meant when he said: “The process of equality is a process of difference.”<sup>407</sup>

Equality is a necessity for the process of subjectivation. In fact, the verification of equality is itself the process of subjectivation. As Rancière writes in, “Politics, Identification and Subjectivization:”

(pertaining to questions such as, does a Frenchwoman belong to the category of Frenchmen?) For they allow these subjects not only to specify a logical gap that in turn discloses a social bias, but also to articulate this gap as a relation, the non-place as a place, the place for a polemical construction. The construction of such cases of equality is not the act of an identity, nor is it the demonstration of the values specific to a group. It is a process of subjectivization.<sup>408</sup>

When a woman who is excluded from the political realm on the basis that she does not have the required capacity, articulates her thoughts in words, she points out to a space that does not originally exist for her and immediately claims this space as her own. Occupying this space is a movement of the will toward political subjectivation. Through asserting the “world” she carries with her as a subject she fills the space of her nonrecognition and verifies the equality of her intellect with everybody else. She also thereby “creates” herself as a visible subject challenging her eviction from a space she shows she can occupy.

From *Proletarian Nights* until *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière shows that to speak is to ‘witness,’ which means to enact the encounters of the subject with the world and the other subjects existing in this world through language. When proletarians assert their participation in the stage of politics, it is not an act of speaking for the sake of speaking, but it is about speaking for

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<sup>407</sup> Rancière, “Politics, Subjectivization, Identification,” October vol 61, *The Identity in Question* (Summer, 1992), 62.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 60.

themselves, the expression of their experiences, their dreams, aspirations, and affects by themselves and for themselves. It is calling attention to the fact that they too exist on the stage and thus should be included in the count.

Rancière's emphasis on translation as a political activity teaches us something new and significant about political subjectivity. Translation reveals that the subject is more complicated than the classical idea of a speaking being. The subject is not merely an empty subject, and the process of political subjectivation goes beyond speech. Reading *Disagreement* discloses the argument that politics is subjectivation, which means that as an activist, one takes hold of a particular political problem within a particular situation. The key idea is that subjectivity is radically different from identity and that the subject is totally empty. Translation demonstrates that political subjectivity is an act of the "will." The will gives back to the subjects their capacity for action so that they may use it toward emancipation. What enables the political subject to speak is not intelligence but the will. This definition of political subjectivity counter argues Bourdieu's position that renders the subject impotent with the idea that the dominated cannot act against their domination because they are suffering from misrecognition. Political subjects understand their situation, which means that they have their own thoughts about the conditions of their oppression and that they can express their understanding using their own words.

Furthermore, it is in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* that Rancière describes the struggle of the subject to express her feelings and thoughts by resorting to language as a material instrument. Rancière does not refer to a technical mastery of language but to improvising a language for oneself just like what proletarians did when they invented their own science and borrowed the words of the bourgeois. Speaking, improvising, and utilizing the language of poetry, the subject verifies the equality of his own intelligence. Describing the process that the uneducated and poor workers underwent to find a way to communicate their thoughts and experiences, Rancière writes:

Consider, for example, the affectionate mother who sees her son come back from a long war. The shock she feels robs her of speech. But "the long embraces, the hugs of a love anxious at the very moment of happiness, a love that seems to fear a new separation; the eyes in which joy shines in the middle of tears; the kisses, the looks,



the attitude, the sighs even the silence,” - all that improvisation in short- is this not the most eloquent of poems? You feel the emotion of it. But try to communicate it. The instantaneousness of these ideas and feelings that contradict each other and are infinitely nuanced- this must be transmitted, made to voyage in the wilds of words and sentences. And the way to do that hasn’t been invented. For then we would have to suppose a third level in between the individuality of that thought and common language...We are left with learning, with finding the tools, of that expression in books. Not in grammarians’ books: they know nothing of this voyage. Not in orators’ books: these don’t seek to be *figured out*; they want to be *listened to*. They don’t want to say anything; they want to command - to join minds, submit wills, force action. *One must learn near those who have worked in the gap between feeling and expression, between the silent language of emotion and the arbitrariness of the spoken tongue, near those who have tried to give voice to the silent dialogue the soul has with itself, who have gambled all their credibility on the bet of similarity of minds.*<sup>409</sup>

This is a lesson that those who were deemed as ignorant, misguided, and fools have taught the philosopher. As Rancière looked into the archives of the workers, he saw the concrete struggles of these people to translate their feelings into words and other gestures. Political subjects are not empty but, in fact, full of experiences, which subjects attempt to communicate through translation into different means of expression. Thus, translation in itself is an aesthetic experience in which the subjects maneuver in between “feeling and expression” to put voices into experiences, emotions, and dreams with the presupposition that they would be understood because everyone is equally intelligent.

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<sup>409</sup> Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 68. Emphasis is mine.

## **Chapter 6**

### **The Subject of Aesthetics and Politics**

The task of this chapter is to deal with the question of the political subject and the process of subjectivation in relation to the link between aesthetics and politics. This is because one of the reasons why Rancière is an exemplary thinker is the relationship between aesthetics and politics that informs his theory of politics and political subjectivity. For Rancière politics is aesthetic in as much as, the contestation of the right to speech involves the assertion of a visible body that demands to be included in the count. I will proceed with the discussion by first explicating the general idea of aesthetics and how it is related to politics in Rancière's oeuvre. Then I will specifically address the question of political subjectivity in Rancière's work in relation to aesthetics and politics by discussing the anonymous subject in aesthetic modernity. Ultimately, the purpose of the discussion is to find out how these conceptions of subjectivity fit in with Rancière's idea of an empty subject and what can be learned from it for understanding contemporary politics.

#### **The Link Between Aesthetics and Politics**

The previous chapter ended with the discussion on political subjectivity and equality in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* wherein we learn that the process of subjectivation is in fact a verification of equality. When the subject speaks, she shows her intellectual capacity to translate the language of the other and appropriate this language to fulfill the political act of demanding recognition. Translation reveals that the idea of an empty subject, a subject without subjectivity, is a complex notion, which involves the will to express. This will to speak in turn relies upon an understanding of the conditions of their oppression but also relates potentially to affects, hopes, dreams, their relationships to labor as well as experiences of solidarity with other workers. These expressions take on various forms but very obvious in the work of Rancière is his attention to the

words of the workers that he discovered in his archival work and which would remain an important reference throughout his later writings.

In the last pages of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière described how the proletarians appropriated for themselves an art that verifies their equality with their masters, this being the art of “speaking” and demanding to be recognized as full human beings endowed with logos. This is directly related to the idea of “literarity,” which appears already in *Disagreement* where Rancière refers to the capacity of human beings to speak “that undoes the relationships between the order of words and the order of bodies that determine the place of each.”<sup>410</sup> Through literarity, words are no longer necessarily attached to the bodies that they signify and meaning becomes available to anyone. In turn, this further disrupts established hierarchies and structures.<sup>411</sup> Rancière will later on develop this concept in his aesthetic writings. Consistent as he was with the assertion of the fundamental fact of equality, Rancière hints at the connection between aesthetics and politics already when he elaborated on the equality of intelligence through the idea of translation. Concrete examples of this are when proletarians assimilated the language of bourgeois poets to express their own thoughts and when the students of Jacotot learned to read and write French without directly being taught by Jacotot, and by making use of the “letters” of the French and Flemish language as tools.

This assertion of equality by the workers and Jacotot’s students already points to the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Rancière’s early works. By “aesthetics,” Rancière means “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and

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<sup>410</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* translated by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1999, 37.

<sup>411</sup> For an elaborate description of the political implications of literarity, see Alison Ross, “Expressivity, literarity, mute speech” in *Jacques Rancière Key Concepts*. ed. by Jean-Philippe Deranty, (Durham, UK: Acumen) 2010), 133-134.

positions within it.”<sup>412</sup> This pertains to two senses of aesthetics, one is aesthetics as perception and the other is aesthetics as a social practice.

Aesthetics is the sense perception of social realities -ways of perceiving doing and making of the various actors involved in the social and political realm, the part of those who have no part, the worthy and the unworthy subjects, those who are counted and those who are excluded- in other words what Rancière calls the ‘distribution of the sensible.’ In relation to the distribution of the sensible, Rancière defines aesthetics as:

...a system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to the sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience.<sup>413</sup>

On the other hand, aesthetics also pertains to aesthetic practices or the ways through which subjects express, entrench and challenge the distribution of the sensible. As the workers appropriated the words of bourgeois poets to express their experiences and thoughts in their own narratives, as they turned their nights into time for writing and other activities, which were not expected from them as laborers, they were able to demonstrate that their expressions are concrete manifestations of aesthetics as a practice. Aesthetics in this sense is political because it disrupts the social but it is a political action, which is still within the social as it questions what is perceived and suggest new ways of perceiving and doing.

Here the link between aesthetics and politics is obvious as Rancière demonstrates that the assertion of equality is a political move that can challenge the existing configuration of structures and entities (both real and perceived) in a community. Aesthetics is politics in as much as it has to do with the move to be perceived and recognized as subjects who were not originally counted as parts of the community and thus it challenges the structures of exclusion. Politics is also

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<sup>412</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, translated and introduced by Gabriel Rockhill, (New York: Continuum), 2004. 12.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 8.

aesthetics in the sense that it is about speaking and demanding to be recognized as part of the whole and this assertion in turn brings up an awareness of the distribution of the sensible which pertains to existing ways of doing, making and seeing in the community.

Thus the distribution of the sensible is Rancière's unique way of framing the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics. Rancière describes aesthetics not just as a theory of affects and sensibilities, or as a theory of artistic practices but also as being directly linked to politics. Aesthetics for him primarily has to do with what is made visible, perceivable and speakable by existing symbolic and material divisions, separations and hierarchies within society. Hence it is historical, material and political. What is sensible, what can be perceived by the senses and what can be the subject of discourse is dependent on the structure that allows it to be seen or conceals it. Artistic practices can reveal what can be seen, said and done in a given historical period. They can also show how this order can be challenged, notably by showing another way of being, doing and making. There is always a parallel between the artistic and the social as revealed by the distribution of the sensible. In the following section, I am going to discuss in detail the dynamics of aesthetics and politics in Rancière through his notion of the regimes of the arts, which pertain to his alternative approach to aesthetics which take into consideration the overlapping paradoxes and contradiction in its the development.

### **The Politics of Aesthetics**

Rancière's early writings from *Reading Capital* to *Disagreement* have made explicit that the central concern of his oeuvre is the question of politics. However, the links that he establishes between aesthetics and politics have also been present in his work from these early writings. The definition of politics as having to do with challenging hierarchies and changing the distribution of the sensible through the assertion of equality by individual subjects and communities, as well as Rancière's focus on the writings of the proletarians in his archival work, demonstrate the

connection that he proposes between aesthetics and politics, which in fact had been present from the start.

In his later texts, after the publication of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière deepened his analysis of the link between aesthetics and politics. Still taking equality as the fundamental assumption, Rancière's discussions now focus on what he calls aesthetic modernity or the aesthetic regime of arts as a period where democracy has become a real possibility. The politics of aesthetics highlights the emergence of a new aesthetic experience given the numerous, complicated relation between social and political actions on the one hand and the conditions of perception and expression on the other within the historical development of artistic representation and the new 'distribution of the sensible'. Rancière devotes the discussion to the history of the paradoxical links between the aesthetic paradigm and the political community.<sup>414</sup>

The view of aesthetics as primarily pertaining to what is visible and speakable hones in on the interplay between perception, representation, aesthetic practices and the implications of these in a broader configuration of a society. At the core of Rancière's aesthetics is that it is in fact political. In order to show this alternative view of both aesthetics and politics, he uses a descriptive approach or what he calls, the regimes of the arts to fully take into account the various elements of the interrelation across hierarchies and paradigms of aesthetic practices. For Rancière: "The important thing is that the question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics be raised at the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization."<sup>415</sup> The three regimes of the art is a counter narrative to histories of modern aesthetics that aims to delineate clearly the specific character of art in particular time frames and how the aesthetic configurations affect the politics of the time. Gabriel Rockhill

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<sup>414</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, translated by Zakir Paul, (London, New York: Verso) 2013.

<sup>415</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 13.

describes that for Rancière, “Rather than there being determined systems that indiscriminately impose themselves on the totality of artistic production within a given time frame, there are competing and overlapping regimes that are racked by internal and external contradictions.”<sup>416</sup> The regimes of the sensible reveal that artistic and social practices overlap and are not strictly chronological as other histories of art express it. For instance, there are forms of representation and expression in the modern aesthetic regime which function on the ethical principle. The regimes of the art show the tensions, paradoxes and contradictions that arise out of the interplay between aesthetics and politics in each specific regime. These contradictions are themselves meant to show to us opportunities for new ways of doing things both at the social level and at the level of representation and expression.

Rancière wants to offer a counter-narrative or counter-history of aesthetic modernity against influential histories and philosophies of art that champion linear accounts of the history of aesthetic practices. He is critical of the approaches to aesthetics that fail to take into account the overlaps and paradoxes within the development of aesthetic representations and the historical context within which they developed because many of these approaches forgot take into consideration the relationship between artistic practices and society. The regimes approach is the method to contest common approaches to art in the humanities, which tend to focus on the development of art alone without taking into account, the context in which this development took place. In particular, Rancière aims at criticizing formal histories of art that argue that the development of art is towards the perfection of a medium, for example from classical to abstract painting, or the metaphysical/ teleological view about the end of art.<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> Gabriel Rockhill, “Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, The Subversion of the Modernist Doxa” in *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, Politics*, translated by James Swenson, introduced by Gabriel Rockhill, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 16.

<sup>417</sup> Jean-Philippe Deranty, “Regimes of the Arts” in *Jacques Rancière, Key Concepts*, 117.

As a counter-narrative, Rancière employs a descriptive method that carefully defines the basic features of the historical understanding of art and art forms in each historical configuration which he calls the regimes of the art. The regimes of the art describe specific ways in which a given epoch conceives of the relationships between discourse, reality especially nature and society, those relationships defining the structural conditions of meaning and expression at each historical time.<sup>418</sup> The three regimes of the arts are the ethical regime of images, the representative or poetic regime and lastly, the aesthetic regime of modernity. Rancière puts much emphasis on this third regime since it summarizes the modern understanding of aesthetics. Through the aesthetic regime, Rancière identifies specific features of the understanding of art characteristic of modern society including its contradictions and paradoxes.

It is important to summarize the three regimes as this will allow us to see how Rancière deepened his discussion of the link between aesthetics and politics. This will give us a broader perspective of the relationships between the social realm, the frames of social perception and the aesthetic practices that run parallel to it. It will also allow us to see what opportunities are opened for subjects in the current historical context. Understanding how Rancière interprets the historicity of our current aesthetic regime is therefore fundamental to understanding his concept of political subjectivity.

## **The Regimes of the Art**

### ***Ethical Regime***

The ethical regime of the arts is concerned with the origin, truth content, purpose and uses of images. Rancière describes this regime in the following words, “In this regime, it is a matter of knowing in what way images’ mode of being affects the *ethos*, the mode of being of individuals

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid.



and communities.”<sup>419</sup> Images are believed to affect the ways of doing and making in a particular community, therefore the question revolves around its truthfulness. Plato’s criticism of art as an imitation twice removed from truth and of the artist who simulates reality in false images and transforms it into poetry, painting and theater is the archetype of this regime.

There is no such thing as an isolated work of art as artistic representations take place within ways of doing and making. Images thus have direct implications on social reality as they take place in the division of labor in the society. In this regime, art is not understood as mere art but always in conjunction to how it could possibly shape the individuals within a community and the community as a whole. Artistic images have an instructional value for the citizens. This is the reason why Plato puts the artists who make copies of simple appearances among the lowest citizens of his republic. The ethical regime is not limited to ancient Greece but also applies to the analyses of representations in the present which assess the value of art forms in terms of their influence on the mind of their audiences.

### ***Representative Regime***

The second regime of the arts is the representative regime which traces its main influence from Aristotle and flourished in the period of the *belles lettres* during the 17th and 18th century.<sup>420</sup> This regime identifies the substance of the arts via the couple poesis/mimesis. It is “mimetic” inasmuch as it is in this period that art developed forms of normativity that stipulated the conditions of good imitation and defined art as the practice of good imitation. In this regime, imitations are recognized as exclusively belonging to art and assessed within this framework. This regime is at the same time “poetic” since it identifies art through a classification of ways of doing and

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<sup>419</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 16.

<sup>420</sup> Rockhill, “Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, The Subversion of the Modernist Doxa” in Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, Politics*, 10.

making.<sup>421</sup> Most importantly, this regime is called “representative” because it is the notion of representation that organizes the connection between the ways of doing, making, seeing and judging. The representative regime “establishes the singularity of art but also the identity with the forms of life that it is connected to.”<sup>422</sup>

There are four major principles that structure the representative regime of arts as described by Rancière in *Mute Speech*. The principle of fiction pertains to the emphasis on the representation of action through stories. As Rancière writes in *Mute Speech*, “the essence of the poem is the representation of actions and not the use of a certain language.”<sup>423</sup> Fiction gives the license to portray a narrative that makes sense of the world within a given space and time, thus breaking away from Plato’s concern with the truthfulness of the artistic image. The second principle is the principle of genericity which pertains to the arrangement of actions following a specific genre. The genre provides “the necessary inscriptions of the functional arrangements of action.”<sup>424</sup> It dictates the rules on how actions should be represented in a narrative, how a story should be told and how characters should be made to act and speak. This connects it to third principle which is the principle of appropriateness. This principle structures the “hierarchy of represented subjects”,<sup>425</sup> how the actions of the characters should be appropriate to what they are representing, how they should speak and what language is proper to the character being represented. This institutes a division between high and low, noble and common, superior and inferior. Lastly, the fourth principle is the principle of actuality. This principle dictates the primacy of speech as act and performance in the present. Speech is the highest expression of intelligibility, “a rhetoric of

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<sup>421</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 16-17.

<sup>422</sup> Rockhill, “Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, The Subversion of the Modernist Doxa” in Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, Politics*, 17.

<sup>423</sup> Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 43.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 44

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 47

contemporary existence, a way of life.”<sup>426</sup> Artistic practices in this regime focus on the verbal articulation of the meaning of the world. In the representative regime, above any other form of expression and representation, speech is of primary importance since it the medium through which the meaning of the world is made to make sense. Rancière summarizes all these four principles in the following way:

...the primacy of action over characters, narration over description, the hierarchy of genres according to the dignity of their subject matter, and the primacy of speaking, of speech in actuality- all of these elements figure into an analogy with a full hierarchical vision of the community.<sup>427</sup>

These four principles are those from which the third regime, the aesthetic regime of the arts breaks away. Even in the present times, however, it remains operative, just like the ethical regime. For instance, the Hollywood film industry have produced commercial films with standardized plots where audiences can identify with the characters because of what these characters represent based on an implicit normative view of propriety.<sup>428</sup>

### ***The Aesthetic Regime***

The third and the most important regime of the arts for Rancière, since it is at the heart of contemporary period is the aesthetic regime of the arts. The aesthetic regime of the arts is Rancière’s name for artistic modernity, in contrast to the Platonic ethical regime and the Aristotelian representative regime. It is characterized by the reversal of the four principles that structure the previous representative regime. The principle of fiction gives way to the primacy of language. The emphasis is no longer on stories that are told to make sense of the world but rather in the power of expression. The genre is dismantled by the principle of the equality of all objects of description. Anything can be spoken about and there are no more prescriptions about who is

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 16-17.

<sup>428</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans by Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 3.

supposed to speak and about what particular topics. The principle of decorum is overturned by the indifference of style in relation to the subject represented. Style becomes an absolute manner of seeing things, in which there are no longer base or beautiful subjects. Lastly, writing replaces performative speech. In the aesthetic regime of the arts, “the privileged space of the theater, the consecrated domain of speech as act and efficacious rhetoric gives way to the novel as the democratic letter that wanders without a privileged place.”<sup>429</sup> Silent things take on a language of their own and meaningless objects become systems of signs.<sup>430</sup> The identification of art no longer occurs via a division of ways of doing and making but is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to modern aesthetic regime. Rancière describes it in the following way:

In the aesthetic regime artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, logos identical with pathos, the intention of the unintentional, etc.<sup>431</sup>

The overturning of the principles of the representative regime by the aesthetic regime which I have just highlighted is thus premised upon a new sensorium, that is to say a new connection between how individuals feel the world and how the world appears to them. The fundamental consequence of this new sensorium is that there is a detachment of discourse and meaning from any secure, essential, fixed, hierarchy-based reference which could be supported by an absolute objective or social reality. Thus we have a new regime of thinking about art in which “art is defined by its being the identity of a conscious procedure and an unconscious production.”<sup>432</sup> In this new regime where logos and pathos become intertwined, the movement

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<sup>429</sup> Rockhill, “Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, The Subversion of the Modernist Doxa” in Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, Politics*, 14.

<sup>430</sup> A particular example that Rancière repetitively uses is Victor Hugo’s cathedral of stones. See Ibid.

<sup>431</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 22-23.

<sup>432</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, translated by Debra Keates and James Swenson, (UK: Polity Press, 2009), 28.

from meaninglessness to meaning is coupled with the constant possibility of a movement from meaning to meaninglessness. Writing is the practice that typically captures and fully realizes this new vision of meaning.

Writing is thus the new favored mode of speech in the aesthetic regime of arts. It takes hold and mobilizes the erring letter that wanders nomadically and is orphaned from its essential origins. By doing so, it asserts equality as it dismantles all the hierarchies established in the previous poetic regime. From now on, anything can be said about any topic by anyone. There is never a closure of discourse and everything is potentially meaningful. Anyone can express themselves and is entitled to witness their own situation or discuss external situations through their own words. Since there is no longer an essential and hierarchical basis that anchors meaning and definition to either an objective or social reference, the letter is available to anyone. Rancière refers to this new expressive material made available in the new regime as the democratic letter the orphan or the erring letter, which have no specific origin and pre-determined structure. It “sets the stage for subsequent confrontations between the anarchic power of literarity and the hierarchical distribution of bodies.”<sup>433</sup> The democracy of the erring letter is thus not merely descriptive of its wandering nature but more importantly for us is normative and political since it inherently challenges authorities and contests the exclusions of the representative mode of seeing and saying the world.

In talking about writing as the medium of the aesthetic regime of the arts, Rancière took his cue from Plato who criticized writing as a form of mute speech. For Plato, Rancière argues, writing is “considered to be a mute *logos*, speech that is incapable of saying what it says differently or of choosing not to speak.”<sup>434</sup> Writing is thus ‘mute speech’ in two different ways. First it is the

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<sup>433</sup> Rockhill, “Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, The Subversion of the Modernist Doxa” in Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, Politics*, 8.

<sup>434</sup> Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, 32.

capacity of signification that is inscribed in all bodies. For instance, in Victor Hugo's novel *Notre dame de Paris* (1831), a cathedral of silent stones that speak replaces the speech of the human beings and becomes the heart of the novel.<sup>435</sup> In this sense, writing is mute speech as it brings logos, meaning and signification to non-human bodies and objects, thus attesting to the Romantic assertion, 'everything speaks.'

There is however another dimension of mute speech. It pertains to the movement from logos to pathos, from what speaks and what is meaningful to the absurdity at the heart of meaning. Rancière describes this second form of 'mute speech' as "a soliloquy, speaking to no one and saying nothing but the impersonal and unconscious conditions of speech itself."<sup>436</sup> It is the voiceless speech of an objective power which resists full expression in logos. There is a force in the things themselves that resists meaning. Logos can never fully capture the world, the sensible, precisely because everything is potentially meaningful. The world resists a full transparency of logos because infinite scope for meaning in the world means that logos can never get to the bottom of its own conditions can never reach to a final principle where it goes free in full transparency.

The aesthetic regime of the arts thus mirrors the reality of democracy regime. Where anyone and even anything can, in principle speak, equality is asserted. The present condition of modernity and the atmosphere of political equality brought about by democracy therefore come with a freedom of expression in a very radical sense. This proliferation of the heteronomous sensible brought about by the aesthetic revolution is precisely what Plato was wary of in his

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<sup>435</sup> Rockhill, "Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, The Subversion of the Modernist Doxa" in Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, Politics*, 13.

<sup>436</sup> Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, 393.

critique of the orphan letter. For Rancière, Plato's critique of writing is an early sign of the realization of the risks of democratic literarity.<sup>437</sup>

Democracy is the regime of the orphan letter which does not follow any pre-given rules and continuously asserts equality that results to a democratic distribution of the sensible. The letter distorts already established spaces of meaning wherever it travels as it opens discourse to multiple possible meanings and is available to multiple speakers for a multiplicity of audiences. Rancière interprets Plato's fear in the following way: "Democracy is the regime of writing, the regime in which the perversion of the letter is the law of the community. It is instituted by the spaces of writing whose overpopulated voids and overly loquacious muteness rends the living tissue of communal ethos."<sup>438</sup>

Amidst the democratic, aesthetic regime of the arts stands a subject who speaks but whose speech is resisted by the pathos of the world. The person who speaks encounters the pathos in logos, which means that she is someone who has a body, who has feelings and experiences. Being part of this modern regime of the arts, the subject can speak meaningfully about these experiences. We have workers who use the words of the poets to claim their place in society. Furthermore, what makes this possible is the world itself because the pathos of speech within the worker is also the pathos of things which have meaning. When workers speak, they are not talking about just their individual subjective experience but at the same time present the world as a space of contestation. Underneath the psychology of the subject is a world that is open to anyone. However, the same workers experience moments of self-doubt and helplessness because while the erring letter allows individuals and objects to speak, "the pure suffering of existence and the pure reproduction of the meaninglessness of life" are also at work.<sup>439</sup> This ambiguity of the modern

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<sup>437</sup> Rockhill, "Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, The Subversion of the Modernist Doxa" in Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, Politics*, 16.

<sup>438</sup> Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 95.

<sup>439</sup> Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, 39.

predicament sets the limitations to the political power of aesthetics. Since the aesthetic regime of the arts is both at the same time the realm of pathos and logos, the subject is caught up in a struggle within it.

The only way out of this contradiction is through the assertion of creative action by the subject that is in the middle of it all, the subject who experiences the sensible. Despite the fact that this subject can always be overwhelmed by pathos, overwhelmed by the absence of a secure foundation for logos, the same subject can always struggle to find means to make sense of its experiences. In this limitation and obscurity at the heart of the discourse of modernity, who is exactly the subject of politics and what is the role of the subject for politics?

### **The Political Subject in the Aesthetic Regime of Arts**

Given that the aesthetic regime is the realm of the letter which both at the same time disrupts established hierarchies and opens up a new world of sensibilities, what becomes of the political subject? What does it mean to be a political subject in a period of multiple available meanings? The aesthetic regime of the arts reveals a dimension of the political subject that seems to contradict Rancière's position in his early works where he defined politics as an act of discourse and claiming one's right to speech. Caught up in pathos and logos, the subject unfolds as a subject who does not know, shaken by the loosening of ties between bodies and meanings brought about by the aesthetic revolution but yet struggling to make sense of all these experiences. However, Rancière shows that the subject's struggle to get out of the contradiction does not stop it from being a political subject. In fact, the definition of what is 'political' now involves the realm of sensibilities. The capacity to feel, dream, hope and even refuse action is very much part of political mobility and political subjectivity. The subject through its bodily commitment whether in choosing to act or to be passive, "speaks" not necessarily through words.



In the next section, I will discuss the subject in the aesthetic regime of the arts who, despite having various means to take hold of her experience through the use of the erring letter and other aesthetic means, remains trapped in the intertwinement of logos and pathos.

### **The Aesthetic Subject: Logos in Pathos, Pathos in Logos**

Rancière has made it clear that the aesthetic regime has liberated the subject from the hierarchies and structures of representation. And yet in this new revolution which has brought about an anarchy of sensibilities, the subject is in danger of losing its own voice. Rancière who is aware of the possibility of the subject being lost in obscurity, poses the question in *The Flesh of Words*, “How can the wondering “I” of the poet who has been liberated from the hierarchies of representation become visible and hearable in aesthetic modernity where there is both passivity and movement?”<sup>440</sup> The question makes us aware of the contradiction that the subject is caught up in the aesthetic regime. On the one hand the subject has been freed from the constraints of hierarchical structures of the representative regime, and yet on the other hand, the democratic character of the aesthetic regime itself threatens to drown this very subject into meaninglessness, notably the meaninglessness of action.

Rancière first explores this phenomenon of subjectivity within the aesthetic regime through literature. In *Mute Speech*, he talks about “writing” and the notion of the ‘orphan letter’ as playing a major role in the displacement of the subject amidst modernity. What the orphan letter does is bring the subject into a sensory level of experience, awaken her sensibilities through words or what Rancière describes as the “sensory coming into being of reason” that would eventually allow the poet to “wander like a cloud.”<sup>441</sup> In short, the orphan letter allows for the subject to confront her experience by materially representing her thoughts and her experiences. As Rancière describes in

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<sup>440</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, translated by Charlotte Mendell, (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2004), 9.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., 13.

the following words: “A principle of the politics of the sensory: against the hierarchies of representation, poetics is identified with a general aesthetic that expresses the laws of feeling, the conveyance of sensation in general.”<sup>442</sup>

Indeed, the aesthetic regime of the arts is a regime of sensation and the orphan letter dictates the new rule of this regime which is itself the lack of any pre-given rules. The subject is brought face to face with the intensity of his experience and the validity of his thoughts, which in the past would have been deemed as foolish and the depth of his misfortunes as insignificant. Since the pathos of the subject is also the pathos of the things in the world, the world itself is a key component of this unfolding of sensibilities. As the subject discloses itself in the world, it also reveals the logos of the world where it belongs. By grabbing hold of the letter, the subjects can now express themselves and account for their place in the world. Nonetheless they remain stuck in the world. This is what we can draw from the example of the carpenter Gauny. Gauny’s days in the workshop are lost in the grim hours of labor. Yet he finds the time to write about trees, birds, the towering buildings outside the workshop windows and about his imagined ownership of the room whose floors he himself installed. This paradigmatic example shows how the ‘erring’ letter functions as the tool of the subject to make sense of the meaninglessness of his experience. Gauny writes in the manner of the great bourgeois poets of his time about the forlornness of his working conditions, hence we witness how the pathos of the worker’s condition is translated into logos.

This seemingly chaotic description of the subject as caught up in logos and pathos is best described in *The Aesthetic Unconscious*. No longer is the subject the subject of reasoned and logical utterances but she is the carrier of the power of thought and non-thought, the pathos of not knowing and the unconscious drive to know. Rancière likens the subject of the aesthetic regime to the tragic hero Oedipus whom he describes as the defective subject whose drive is “the pathos of knowledge: the maniacal relentless determination to know, the furor that prevents understanding, the refusal to recognize the truth in the form in which it presents itself, the catastrophe of unsuitable

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid. 19.

knowing, a knowing that obliges one to withdraw from the world of visibility.”<sup>443</sup> Oedipus best represents the experience of the subject within aesthetic modernity as he embodies the “tragic identity of knowing and not knowing, of action undertaken and pathos undergone.”<sup>444</sup> What makes it doubly difficult for the subject is the pathos of the things themselves:

The aesthetic unconscious, consubstantial with the aesthetic regime of art, manifests itself in the polarity of this double scene of mute speech: on the one hand, a speech written on the body that must be restored to a linguistic signification by a labor of deciphering and rewriting; on the other hand, the voiceless speech of a nameless power that lurks behind any consciousness and any signification, to which voice and body must be given.<sup>445</sup>

Oedipus in fact embodies a way of knowing that is in contradiction to how in general, we have always been taught about knowledge being a subjective act of grasping an objective reality. Instead he demonstrates a kind of knowing by way of affectation, passion, or even sickness of a living being all the while aiming for rational understanding.<sup>446</sup> Going back to the example of the 19th century workers who managed to produce their own writings, these workers ‘know’ their conditions which may not necessarily be similar to how the thinkers know, an objective, abstract, matter-of-factly kind of knowledge. The workers know subjectively through their bodies, passion and experiences. Indeed, this kind of knowing is full of pathos. It is a way of knowing that is full of subjectivity, being borne out of the very fabric of the affects, passions and embodied experience of the workers themselves. Yet these workers also signify their pathos through logos, and despite the difficulty in expression, the workers still manage to reveal meaning in their experiences.

Within the aesthetic regime of the arts, there are different regimes of sensibility and activity, which are either positive or negative for the subject. There is the manic, hyper-activity without logos as exemplified by Oedipus. He is the hero who does not know, wants what he does

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<sup>443</sup> Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, 19.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid., 22.

not want, acts by suffering and speaks through muteness.<sup>447</sup> Hence, we have a subject who acts without a clear goal, or does not know what it wants, who speaks without any intended meaning. There is also the passive subject who withdraws into the total opposite of this manic activity, a subject who lacks a drive to do anything, inactive, apathetic as exemplified by Julien Sorel.<sup>448</sup> The positive side of this is that these limitations of the subject also open the door to endless potentialities for the same subject who possesses a body. The embodied subject can engage in the political act of dissent by interrupting the logos not just through the flesh of words but also through the flesh of the body.

This is the case of the subject in the aesthetic regime of arts. The subject is trapped in the dilemma of having the means of pure expression about its thoughts, feelings and sensations and yet the opening of the multiplicity of sensibilities around this very subject presents a formidable challenge. In fact, Rancière's questions include how can the sensible fabric of subjective experience find means of expressions in the aesthetic regime wherein the sensible is disclosed and discloses a world where everything is up for grabs? Or how many ways are there to be both at the same time logical but not really understand one's meaning? After outlining the basic characteristics of the aesthetic regime through literature in *Mute Speech*, Rancière extends his questioning into how bodies become the vessel of the sensible in everyday experience.

Here we see Rancière moving beyond politics as discourse to a politics which involves the subject's material body. He seems to pick up once again the themes from *Proletarian Nights* in order to focus on a notion of political subjectivity beyond speech. The next section will explore another dimension involved in this aesthetic modernity, which is focused on finding out what bodies can possibly teach us about politics.

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<sup>447</sup> Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 52.

<sup>448</sup> Jean-Philippe Deranty, "The Symbolic and the Material: A Review of Jacques Rancière's *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*." *Parrhesia* 18: 139-144.  
<[https://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia18/parrhesia18\\_deranty.pdf](https://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia18/parrhesia18_deranty.pdf)>

## Speaking Bodies

In the texts that followed *Mute Speech* from *The Flesh of Words* until *Aisthesis* Rancière began to increasingly focus on what he called in *Aisthesis* as, “bodies that speak.” This expression pertains to the embodied subject of aesthetic modernity who, as described above, is confronted by a deep, mysterious, unconscious sensible that seeks to incarnate itself in the fabric of our sensible experience. Rancière identifies the different ways of being a body that arrests established logos, messes up the distribution of the sensible and opens up new modalities of “poietic” action. He issues an invitation to explore this alternative way of becoming a political subject in the aesthetic regime. For example, in the first chapter of *Aisthesis* he describes the classical sculpture of a mutilated body, the *Belvedere Torso* as revealing “new potentials of the body for the art of tomorrow,”<sup>449</sup> -potentials which can be freed when common representations of the body are revoked. This is tantamount to saying that in the aesthetic regime of arts, we can begin to explore how bodies speak and thereby challenge established dimensions and invent new forms of life. The purpose of this exploration is not merely for the further understanding of the aesthetic regime but more importantly to show how through the discovery of various potential dimensions of the body, new meanings become possible.

This idea of speaking bodies could first be glimpsed in *Proletarian Nights* and then re-emerged in Rancière’s later writings on mute speech and literature. In the proletarian encounter with literature, he described how the new language of the aesthetic regime became merged with bodies. We have proletarians who were suffering in the work that they do and who upon encountering the erring letter became aware of how their own subjective utterances were also political. As a paradigmatic example, Rancière’s favorite joiner-philosopher Gauny in his journals suggested that one must walk from morning to night.<sup>450</sup> This body that insists on walking claims

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<sup>449</sup> Rancière, *Aesthesis*, 20

<sup>450</sup> “When one disposes of oneself in absolute independence, one must walk from morning to night.” Gauny,

its independence by reveling in the enjoyment of the physical space where it exists. Gauny's body occupies the space that is being deprived from it as a worker. He rebels by trying to be everywhere where he is not expected to be. Underneath the words used by Gauny to articulate his "cenobitic" philosophy and beyond the words of the philosopher who rediscovers them, it is through the simple actions of the body that one becomes a visible political subject. The suffering proletarian's body, his gesture of putting down his tools and looking outside the window and the practice of spending his time in walking around the city is as equally political as appropriating the words of the bourgeois poets in his journals. The point that I am making is that political subjects are also embodied subjects.

We find the same use of bodies in the works of poets who began to incorporate in their poetry, figures of dead and abandoned children as well as sweaty bodies and idiotic utterances of the proletarian. The best example of this for Rancière is Rimbaud's references to the conditions of the workers in the century within which he lived:

New poetry for Rimbaud must be identified with the whole of language. His fate is necessarily linked to the utopia of the new language and of reconciled bodies. Rimbaud travels through this utopia and undoes it by accompanying it with other music: the speech of an uncounted, the idiot romance of obscure misfortune.<sup>451</sup>

This new poetry that emerged found a way to bring together the embodied experiences of workers and the suffering and misfortunes of the proletarian class with the lyric verses of the poets. These workers who are depicted in the representative regime as being beneath meaningful relevance are suddenly subjects who speak through their bodies in the new regime. This means that the passivity and apathy which are attributed to them by the representative regime are not sophisticated enough. There is something essential in this newfound attention to the embodiment of the subject of the aesthetic regime. Aside from the poets awakening the proletarians to their capacities to think, Rancière brings to the fore the contrast between the representative versus the

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"Économie cenobitique," Fonds Gauny, Ms. 151; extracts in Rancière (ed.), *Le philosophe plébéen*, 106 quoted in Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 84.

<sup>451</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words*, 65.

aesthetic regime's treatment of the body of the subject and the new potentials for expression and action.

In fact, in *Aisthesis*, Rancière performs an exhaustive study of the type of bodily potentialities opened up by the aesthetic regime. In his review of the book, Deranty has defined the many norms that are at play in Rancière's quasi phenomenological description of the subject's representation and place in the aesthetic regime in contrast to the representative regime: 1) the contrast between the active and the passive where passivity is viewed as low status and a pathological state; 2) the body as means and medium of action in contrast to a functional body caught up internally and externally in the logic of means and ends, cause and effect; 3) the body as an organism obeying the laws of good proportion between its different parts vs. a principle defining beauty as harmony without necessarily any care about proportion; 4) the body as one fully articulated and integrated entity in contrast to the anarchy of parts and finally; 5) the body as unitary, expressive centre of affect, perception and thought versus anarchy of affects and passions.<sup>452</sup>

The shift in the representation of bodies within the aesthetic regime of arts ushers in a new dimension of political subjectivity, which takes the material condition of the body as a means of expression of the sensible within itself when the body becomes something outside of itself. Every chapter of *Aisthesis* shows the different ways of being an embodied subject that disrupts the distribution of the sensible in the aesthetic regime of arts. I will not go through every chapter but only highlight some significant examples from the book.

In Loïe Fuller's *Dance of Light*, the 'figure' of the body according to Rancière sums up two things in one. "It is the literal, material, presence of a body that is at the same time, the poetic operation of metaphor, condensation and metonymic displacement: the body outside itself condensing the late evening, the body in movement writing the latent poem of the dreamer 'without

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<sup>452</sup> Jean-Philippe Deranty, "The Symbolic and the Material: A Review of Jacques Rancière's *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*." 142.

the apparatus of a scribe’.”<sup>453</sup> In Fuller’s performance, the body represents the complex layerings of the sensible inside of itself through a manner of expression that is outside of itself. The movement made by the dancer in the center is invisible but what becomes visible are the many different shapes that are formed through the absent figure of the dancer. The body of the dancer merged with the fabric with which it is clothed becomes invisible and transforms itself into various forms, a butterfly or a flower through a play of movements, light and shadows, far from the body of a human being that it really is. The *Serpentine Dance* defies the laws of good proportion through its constant movement and fluidity without necessarily representing any sort of wholeness and geometrical symmetry. This is a body that is energetic, dynamic but lacking a unity within itself. Here is a frenetic body that destroys common representations of what role bodies should play in a dance performance. There is no narrative but constant movement which is devoted to its own disappearance as a body and a combination of theatrical lights and movement. In its frenetic movement and creation of numerous sensible forms, it shows the constant transformation of logos into pathos, the transition from meaning to a reproduction of the meaninglessness of life that is however meaningful.

Fuller’s *Serpentine Dance* thus, in the analysis of Rancière is political because in general, it shatters the laws of the regime of representation about what it means to be a body that is expected to follow the laws of good proportion. More interestingly, it does this destruction through the use of the body itself, by showing another way of being a body. Fuller re-invents the body in classical representation by shifting the focus of attention from the central figure of the dancer to a condensation of the subjective will and action where the mass of flesh that is the dancer and the movement of this dancer becomes a pure act, which is entirely material. Subjectivity therefore becomes a pure movement, thus a subjectivity without a subject but a pure abstract form. The dance becomes a pure form of contestation of the hierarchy of representation according to causality, symmetry and good proportion. Moreover, the use of “industrial accomplishment”

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<sup>453</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 99.



(light, electricity, smoke) in Fuller's performance to destroy the monotony of machine and the production of what makes sense, the beautiful and the useful is the critique of the industrial period that itself feeds on the logic of causality also contributes to this contestation of the industrial stage itself. the Rancière avers that, "through artifice they re-invent the very forms in which sensible events are given to us and assembled to constitute a world."<sup>454</sup> And in the re-invention, more importantly, it opens the possibility of being a new body in the aesthetic regime.

The same explosion of movements can be found in Charlie Chaplin's critique of the mechanical age in cinema by projecting his bodily movements without speech through the camera. The anti-acting actor of the 1920's -who is considered by some as an avant-garde artist, whose scripts are written during the filming itself, who is almost the only actor in his movies and who does not speak through his mouth but through the movements of his body—is representative of the subject of the aesthetic regime caught up in the absurdity of the mechanical age where he manages still to cleave meaning.

His gestures as a virtuoso goof who fails every time he succeeds, and succeeds every time he fails, make him an exemplary inhabitant of a new sensible universe belonging to the machines that carry out and negate the will and its ends at the same time; for they only lend themselves to his enterprises at the cost of imposing the stubborn repetition of a movement whose own perfection is to want nothing on its own.<sup>455</sup>

By projecting a disenchanted, nonchalant figure in the screen, silent with words but whose gestures are always active and whose body never rests, Chaplin disturbs the logic of both theater cinema contradicting the fiction of a story through the projection of his own bodily movements that challenges the accepted logic of representation. He mimics the silent recording machine that never stops registering all sorts of movements in front of it without care, a silent witness to all that passes through its lens. Rancière describes Chaplin's main contribution to cinema below:

This is the anti-acting actor's contribution to cinema: he brings a paradoxical virtue into the machine age, and projects it onto the moving screen ...the virtue of doing

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<sup>454</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 203-204.

nothing. He puts inertia into perpetual motion, caught both in the immediate efficiency of the reaction and in the uselessness of the mechanism that always returns to its original position. He makes this continual excess and lack of efficiency into the distinct art of moving shadows projected onto a depthless surface. His performance as an anti-acting actor is above all a perversion of the very logic of the agent.<sup>456</sup>

Chaplin's famous character Charlot does not hold a substantial back story but only presents itself in front of the camera as a figure of a man with a moustache, a hat, a cane and baggy pants which appear to be too big for his physique. The man is reduced to a mass of flesh dressed in oversized clothes, whose face is devoid of emotions, whose actions and appearance do not make sense and consist of repetitive actions without projected objectives. He enters and leaves the screen as a body in oversized clothes giving into the pathos of mechanized life. Nonetheless, the interesting strength of Chaplin's work is in the way he carries out the critique of the cinema through the use of his own body as a moving machine that frenetically projects images.

Chaplin shows how in the aesthetic regime, it is a possibility for bodies to be the agents of the disruption of the mechanistic logic by using his own body to critique mechanical life. In general, similar to Loie Fuller's *Serpentine Dance*, Chaplin destroys the logic of the representation of a body from the classical regime of the arts and shows a new way of becoming a body, however this time, as a mechanized figure that destroys the logic of the machine itself. He therefore critiques the logic of mechanism, which is a logic of the tyranny of linear causality through frenetic bodily gestures that does not have expected ends. Chaplin's work is a disruption of the powerful tyranny of taylorist machines of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the mechanistic art form of the cinema itself, which is his medium. Through the excessive movement of his body in front of the camera, Rancière imitates the mechanical frenzy of the machine but without causality and ends. Fuller and Chaplin's examples demonstrate how every single body has a political potential to contest visibility and perception. They re-invent their own bodies in order to critique the mechanical logic of everyday life in the capitalist structure of production. They are subjects who show different possibilities of

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

how the pathos of the aesthetic regime is embodied to destroy the logos of mechanical reproduction by mimicking the frenetic movement energy of this mechanical life.

From Rancière's aesthetic writings we can pinpoint the role that bodies play in politics. If politics is about the subject's dissensus, the arresting of organized time and structured space and a rare moment of interrupting already established hierarchies and structures, Rancière demonstrates in *Aisthesis* how politics is not performed by wills and words alone, but just as importantly by embodied subjects whose gestures, and not just speeches can be modes of revolt. The affect of a body in a state of non-stop movement captures the pathos and the loss of reason that is characteristic of aesthetic modernity and thus functions as a critique of logos, order, hierarchy and structure that in many ways create various forms of oppression. Modern art, not just high art as in the case of the *Serpentine Dance* but also popular cinema demonstrates new modes of being embodied subjects that participate in transforming our understanding of the pathos of the modern aesthetic regime.

### **Passive bodies and the plebeian dream**

On other instances, the body of the subject also becomes an expression of passions and affects without doing anything, by being an inactive and passive observer of the world. Yet in this very gesture of inactivity, it also expresses the other aspect of proletarian revolution. In *Aisthesis*, Rancière shows this through the character of the plebeian scholar Julien Sorel in Stendhal's novel *Scarlet and Black*. Julien Sorel was a young intellectual from a family of workers who rose to the upper class by using the same ladder of intrigues that those in the upper class are so fond and familiar with (seduction, sucking up to powerful people, conspiracy) However, in a bout of jealousy, he shoots his lover Madame de Renal, for which he was tried and sentenced to death.

In this typical tragic love story, Julien Sorel is the atypical hero who instead of appealing for his life, in the end refuses to do anything as he claimed to have found the true enjoyment of life within the walls of his prison cell. For Sorel, happiness is to enjoy the quality of sensible

experience that one reaches when one stops calculating, wanting and waiting, as soon as one resolves to do nothing.<sup>457</sup> What is interesting in this choice of passivity is that this non-activity shatters the notion of a controlled, willful, individual social action<sup>458</sup> At the same time it gives a glimpse into another possible aspect of emancipatory “action” that is less accounted for: the promotion of a quality of sensible experience where one does nothing, thereby stopping the order of things.

Sorel performs a subversion through the enjoyment of the moment, when one is expecting nothing. What is rebellious and thus political about this is that this is the kind of time that is forbidden the plebeian, whom the anxiety of emerging from this condition always condemns to waiting for the effect of chance or intrigue.<sup>459</sup> In this sense, Sorel destroys an old hierarchy of enjoyment and puts himself on equal footing with those in the upper class who do have the leisure of time. Choosing not to choose in a universe where one must always choose and calculate the consequences of these choices,<sup>460</sup> is a liberating experience for the young man from a family of manual laborers. In this space of non-choice, of passivity, of the enjoyment of life in his prison cell, he celebrates a paradoxical kind of freedom that is scandalous within the “distribution of the sensible” in which he lives.

“To have the power to do everything and consequently to do nothing. To go away from the forces that forces one to choose.”<sup>461</sup> This is the newfound happiness of Julien Sorel and this is a revolutionary mode of happiness for the proletarian. In contrast to the classical claims of social revolution about the aim of proletarians being the violent, hyper-active conquest of society, the plebeian’s happiness “lies in doing nothing, in annulling hic et nunc the barriers of social hierarchy

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<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>458</sup> Jean-Philippe Deranty, “The Symbolic and the Material: A Review of Jacques Rancière’s *Aisthesis*: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art.” 142.

<sup>459</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 46.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 50.

and the torment of confronting them, in the equality of pure sensation, in the uncalculated sharing of the sensible moment.”<sup>462</sup>

The powerful gesture is not limited to an active dynamic movement on the barricades, which might be captured in a script at the theater or in front of the camera. The aesthetic regime of the arts demonstrates that passivity and indifference can carry a powerful potency that could stand as a massive political statement and activity. With its confusion of action and lack of structure it contains within it a force which escapes logos or rationality. Take for instance Shakespeare’s Hamlet as a representative figure of the aesthetic regime. His incapacity to decide leads to the tragic death of all characters around him, Or take Gauny’s momentary break from a day’s work by daydreaming of scenes outside the windows of the workshop and occupying rooms with the floors of which he has laid. Both instances show how seemingly apolitical moments can be potentially the beginning of politics. Passivity however has a negative and positive side for the subject. In the case for instance of Hamlet who wallowed in his confusion and became stuck in his situation, his passivity did not contribute anything positive for him and in fact it leads to the tragedy of his own death and everyone else surrounding him. Julien Sorel’s passivity on the other hand was an enjoyment of the freedom, which has been deprived from a proletarian and therefore even if he was inside his prison cell, he was happy.

### **Objects as Bodies**

At other times the power of the sensible manifests itself also in banal objects of daily life. This is the lesson drawn from Maurice Maeterlinck’s reading of Ibsen’s play, *The Master Builder*. In his article, the playwright introduced a new idea of the theater of the soul, leading to the notion of a theater without action or movement. Maeterlinck’s reading of the play highlights an external non-human gaze that confronts the human subject, an external force that could be glimpsed in the silence of material objects: “voices of the soul...which make themselves heard in the silence of

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<sup>462</sup> Ibid., 52.

doors and windows and the little voice of light in any bedroom whatsoever.<sup>463</sup> For Maeterlinck as Rancière describes it:

...The new drama would increasingly tend to fuse its sensible reality with the material reality of the stage, to bestow light with the force of the drama that it lit, lending the arrangement of doors and windows the dramatic intensity that used to be entrusted to the characters that crossed their threshold to bring messages from the outside.<sup>464</sup>

The immobile theater thrives in distancing bodies and grimaces in favor of the lifeless potential of architecture, the statue, line and color, light and movement.<sup>465</sup> Thus the immobile drama which is the drama of ordinary life rejects language and expressive forms and allows silent objects and the interplay of external elements such as light, sounds and the staging of objects to convey the power of an external force. The key idea is that the subject is not fully in control. A subject is subjected to the absurdity of the world, where she is not an all-powerful, all knowing being who can capture everything through logos. There is an unconscious power that lurks outside the subject, which she must learn to deal with not by attempting to translate this pathos into logos but by allowing it to unfold. The example set by Maeterlinck's immobile theater shows a creative way for the invisible to be sensible through the use of objects, and production design on stage.

In a manner that is somehow similar to the passivity of Julien Sorel wherein the subject's passivity is a contestation of structured space and organized time, Maeterlinck's theater of the soul transposes sensation not through a plot of action but through a thought embodied in lifeless objects that in turn arrests, besieges, confronts and shocks. Hence the focus of the theater is not the action of the characters but in the other elements that comprise the production such as the music, the lighting, the stage design and the props. Rancière describes that, "Maeterlinck aims to paralyze this regime of sensible appearance of thought through a system of correspondences."<sup>466</sup> The door,

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<sup>463</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 117.

the window, lamp and bedside table “make the impersonal soul of the world vibrate in individual life.”<sup>467</sup> In this re-focusing of attention in seemingly useless and in fact lifeless object which speak about the unrepresented pathos of the world, there is a visible silence that destroys the old hierarchy of language and plot. The visible silence of these objects make us aware of energies, of the pathos that seeks to represent itself through whatever tools it might find. In reality, political contestations and disruptions may not necessarily involve a plot.

## Conclusion

The link that Rancière establishes between aesthetics and politics demonstrates to us that there are many ways of being a political subject in modernity. The erring letter has made meaning possible although it always entails an obscure dimension at the end which collapses and does not quite capture experience. The subjects that Rancière highlighted in *Aisthesis* are far from accepted representations of what political subjects are supposed to be since they deviate from the pre-given standards in their practices and this is precisely what makes them political. In their digression and dis-identification, they challenge the distribution of the sensible and invent new forms of practices that traverse the obscure dimension of meaning in order to make visible the hidden pathos of life. Their manner of digression is not just done at the level of discourse but in the level of the body and the sensible. Translation of the will and feelings is not only done through words. Rancière contradicts his official position in *Disagreement* and moves beyond politics as discourse in his works on aesthetics and politics. The plastic form of a sculpture, the camera, immobile theater, dance of light, all of these are forms of revolt against established representations at the same time an attempt to capture the dilemma of the subject in the regime of arts.

Politics therefore is never apart from embodied subjects. Despite the efforts of some thinkers to reduce politics to the notion of rational discourse, Rancière shows that the very core of politics can be rooted in the struggle and confusion of the individual. In contrast to the radical

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

goals of the social revolution to take over the system, a mode of happiness of the proletarian can consist in doing nothing. The passive body in its unwillingness to do anything is a very powerful vessel of political action because it goes against expectations of how a body should behave. The same is true for overly active bodies, fragmented bodies, mechanical bodies and so on. There frenetic movements are visible critiques of the logic of the mechanical causality in the same manner the political disruptions transform the mechanisms of politics as police. This is the reason why the fragmented sculpture of a torso which represents a laid back state of a hero is equally as powerful as a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman who forms an association of women workers. Both bodies demand perception as they both question existing perceptions, both bodies interrupt logos.

Artistic practices are political not necessarily because they represent virtues and values that should be emulated by their audiences but because of their break from representation by asserting other possibilities which require presumption of equality. Artistic practices teach the possibility that anyone can say anything at any given moment. They therefore give way to moments of surprise that can shatter already established standards and rules. The artists and artworks that Rancière highlights in *Aisthesis* are similar to the proletarians of *Proletarian Nights* who acceded to forms of experience that had been denied them before. Now the worker is not the sole representative of the struggle for emancipation because artists too are political subjects who struggle to make sense of aesthetic modernity. These artists have shown in many ways how bodies can be utilized and they lived to dis-identify from standard norms by exploring a different side of fragmentation, passivity, fluidity, silence in other words the infinite possible forms and state of the body.

Also, it is important to note that despite his criticisms of phenomenology and his aversion towards the phenomenological method, Rancière as obvious in *Aisthesis* and already in *Proletarian Nights*, uses the language and vocabulary of phenomenology. The emphasis of the body in *Aisthesis* as well as the importance that he gives to the bodily actions of the proletarians are very close to phenomenology. In spite of his insistence on the emptiness of the subject devoid



of identity, psychology, sociological background, referred to individual experiences of the artists and characters or subjects in works of art. The emphasis on the flesh and the use of the vocabulary such as flesh, prose of the world, perception is closely related to phenomenology.

In addition to the emphasis on bodily experiences, Rancière tends to highlight individual subjects and their hyper-individual moments. Rancière seems to be telling us that politics is not necessarily collective or at least can start in individual experiences and actions. Revolutions do not necessarily have to be started by a collective. In some instances, it only needs a single individual, a single body who takes the world by surprise through a break away from already established traditions through the genius and creativity of the way they rebel. All it may take is a momentary break from how things are done and the insistence of the will to continue the break away at the expense of being branded as boring, uninteresting or absurd.

All of these compelling ideas are present in Rancière's work on aesthetics and politics but the predominant reading of Rancière is mostly focused on the debate about his notion of politics. It seems that the understanding of Rancière's work on politics have been reduced to *Disagreement* along with scattered interest on his writings about film and education. Reading his rich aesthetic writings can alert us to the way in which forms of experiences or artistic practices can be innovative tools for politics most especially if the goal is to move away from representative politics. While there are attempts to put together aesthetics and politics, many of these efforts are still fixed at either the ethical or the representative regime. Rancière teaches us, however, that if effective changes are to be made and old ineffective systems are to be transformed, we must give space for creativity in a precarious, wide variety of experiences and practices. I will provide examples which substantiates these claims in my conclusion.

## Conclusion

So what have we learned from Rancière? Specifically, what have we learned from Rancière about the subject of politics? To answer this question, I endeavored to accomplish two tasks in this thesis. First, I proposed an alternative reading of Rancière that goes beyond his orthodox position and the mainstream reading of his notion of politics as discursive and of political subjectivity as empty. Second, I attempted to answer the question “Who is the subject of Politics?” based on the alternative reading I proposed. I chose to use Rancière’s philosophical work for my main question because he is, among modern contemporary political philosophers, the one who has a theory of politics that mostly depends on the subject, and yet in his own theory, there is a struggle and a tension in terms of what constitutes the political subject. I think that the way through which Rancière conceptualized his notion of political subjectivity could become an invaluable material for reflection on how we understand politics in the present and on how we should think of our roles as political subjects. Despite the rich literature written on Rancière’s politics, only a few have highlighted the complexity of political subjectivity in his works, as he himself seems to contradict himself when he refers to political subjects.

Rancière is unique because of his criticism of the intellectual elitism of philosophers and thinkers who have immensely influenced his philosophical method.<sup>468</sup> This sort of criticism also sets him apart from several political philosophers both past and present, who ground their respective political theories on an ontology that creates a hierarchy of knowing and where only those who are intelligent can possibly partake in politics. He comes from a background of a long study of emancipatory politics and the labor movement where he distinguishes himself through a theory of subjectivation. As a student of Althusser in the 1960s, Rancière discovered scientific Marxism, which has a definition of political subjectivity that is devoid of any human experience.

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<sup>468</sup> Among numerous philosophers who influenced Rancière’s thinking, Althusser and Marx were the ones who played a significant role in his work.

From this encounter with Althusser's structuralist reading of Marx, he developed a theory of subjectivity according to which the subject is an empty subject, that is, a merely formal entity that lacks substance and identification. However, after the May 1968 revolt in France, Rancière severed his ties with Althusserian Marxism and spent a decade going through the archives of the French workers from the 1830s, those workers who initiated the labor movement and who were instrumental in defining the modern French society. There he found a rich array of workers' literature that led him to his unique method of developing philosophical arguments about politics based upon a careful attention to subjects, allowing them to speak about their experiences, emotions, and dreams as they aspired to escape social domination.

Obviously, there is an identifiable tension in the way Rancière writes about political subjectivity. On the one hand, he argues that it is "empty," yet on the other, he has numerous references to these political subjects as concrete, historical subjects. I specifically chose Rancière for my question on political subjectivity because he embodies the struggle of a thinker who initially seems to deny the experiences upon which the claims of political subjects are based as we have seen in this orthodox political theory. I read his ambivalence toward the experiences of political subjects as a performative ambivalence of a political thinker who struggles to come up with a theory of emancipation while trying not to fall into the trap of creating a theory that would lead to more oppression. Whether Rancière would admit to it or not, there are moments when he ends up doing what he criticizes in other critical political thinkers. There are instances in his writings and interviews in which he tends to focus only on the discursive aspect of politics while diminishing the fact that the speeches or the words of the subjects are rooted in their emotions, experiences, demands, claims, longings, and dreams. Interestingly, despite his aversion toward phenomenology, his theory of politics and political subjectivity is rooted in a phenomenology of injustice. This is not a popular way of doing political theory in the contemporary period where thinkers often resort to ontology or pure normative arguments. A majority of readers of Rancière focus on his idea of politics as a democratic contestation of exclusion through performative speech

without acknowledging the sources that significantly informed Rancière's thinking, that is, the workers whom he encountered in his archival work.

What is particularly compelling in this method is how he has taken it upon himself to be the witness and the narrator of the voices of ordinary people who have been excluded from the writings of philosophers, a gesture signaling that they were deemed as intellectually subordinate. Rarely can we find a philosopher who develops the heart of his philosophical theory from a thorough study of ordinary people, i.e., political actors and political movements. Against the tradition of intellectual mastery in philosophy, Rancière claims to have realized that the workers, "had given philosophy the same conceptual heart as Plato."<sup>469</sup> He is therefore a particularly interesting thinker inasmuch as he assigns a vital role in politics to the political subject whom he regards as equally intelligent as a master thinker such as Plato. Also, Rancière is an exemplary thinker because he is not afraid to acknowledge something positive and, in fact, even ground his politics on the political subject whom many political theories would deem as mystified, or ignorant. This is a powerful gesture that broadens politics beyond its prescribed theoretical and practical confines, for instance, the belief that politics, in principle, is the territory of the intelligent and those who can afford the leisure to engage in public political discourse. He managed to include the uncared, the miscounted, or the misrepresented from whom we can learn new ways of being political. However, despite these unique ways through which Rancière developed his notion of political subjectivity, we can still sense his hesitations and ambivalence.

My proposed reading of Rancière is not the "official" one that many of his interpreters adhere to and is one that he himself speaks against in some of his later works and interviews. In this thesis, I suggest a reading of Rancière that is more focused on the "experiences" of the subject of politics. This alternative reading proposes that underneath the famous theory of *Disagreement*, which is premised upon a theory of the equality of intelligence, there is a whole layer of subjective

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<sup>469</sup> Jacques Rancière "Interview: Jacques Rancière Democracy means equality – Passages" *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy*, 82 (Mar/Apr 1997), 29.

experiences. I suggest this reading in the hope of drawing out a richer account of political subjectivity from Rancière's oeuvre, one that gives equal importance to both discourse and experience. I think that such a narrative gives us a more elaborate understanding of the political subject not merely for the purpose of understanding what Rancière meant but for political theory in general. Recognizing the various dimensions of the political subject allows us to explore several possibilities on how this political subject contributes to politics.

Contrary to interpretations of Rancière that focus on his most famous political text *Disagreement*, I attempted to highlight the significant attention that Rancière allocates to the proletarians who were part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century revolution in France, in particular Rancière's paradigmatic examples, particularly Gauny and Jacotot. Through this, I aimed to demonstrate that despite the common readings of Rancière's notion of politics as being focused on words, language and speech, and his self-declared aversion to the "flesh and blood" of subjects,<sup>470</sup> experiences and emotions are equally important as a part of subjectivity that could be the beginning of emancipatory political struggle.

As a result of this alternative reading, we are able to accentuate a rich theory of subjectivity that goes beyond the orthodox reading of Rancière and his own interpretation of his work, which in the end are not so far from Habermas's consensus-theory of democracy<sup>471</sup> and classical democracy theory.<sup>472</sup> Indeed in his official theory in *Disagreement*, Rancière argues that politics is discourse, and politics first takes place once the subject claims his rights to speech; but Rancière expanded his analysis to show that politics likewise includes a rich array of forms of action and even experiences. He even goes as far as saying that seemingly apolitical or anti-political moments such as emotions (e.g., love, friendship, communal bond in workers' association), or seemingly

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<sup>470</sup> Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject" in Rancière and the Contemporary Political Scene. 207.

<sup>471</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norm: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* trans by William Rehg (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>472</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1971).

useless gestures (e.g., dreaming passively in jail, the frenetic movement of a dancer's body, putting down the worker's tools to look outside the window) can be the beginning of politics.

I began this thesis with a reconstruction of the orthodox, mainstream position of Rancière as viewed from his most famous work, *Disagreement*. Politics, for Rancière, is political subjectivation, which means that for him, politics happens when someone rises up to demand recognition and in the process constitutes itself as a political subject. It is the identification, through the performative act of disagreement, of a miscount where the parts of the whole are excluded from the whole itself. Politics therefore is the act of the subject who is always outside the count whose role is to dispute this miscount.

In *Disagreement* as well, Rancière invites us to rethink and reimagine democracy from how it has been defined by consensus-based, liberal theories in order to find something more substantive in it. Democracy is not about agreement and not merely the simple inclusion of everyone as it is based on a paradoxical conception of the demos, which is the uncounted, the surplus created by the miscount of social structures in society. Real politics is, in essence, democratic but in the sense that there will always be a miscount because the demos will always point out to the wrong of the standard or foundation, which is the basis of the social count. This gesture of redefining politics as democracy and democracy as claiming a universality that is denied, is important as it provides a new perspective on democracy, which, in contemporary systems, has been strongly linked to liberalism<sup>473</sup> and which paradoxically has resulted in the continuation of countless forms of exclusion. When democracy is defined according to its fundamental principle as the radical equality of everyone, everyone can claim the right to speak, to be heard, to be recognized, and ultimately to disagree against a politics of representation and identification where the goal is to settle differences and arrive at a consensus. Disagreement is

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<sup>473</sup> Liberalism upholds the value of the law, of rights, the freedom of the individual, what Rancière calls the taming of the demos, keeping them on the shores of politics, keeping the demos away from political affairs. It operates on the principle that we will all reap the rewards of freedom and individual rights as long as we agree and let the polis or the government do its job of distributing lots to the people.

necessary so that real politics can happen, and this, in turn, requires that political subjects are created. This opens up new possibilities for real democracy to allow new perspectives, new gestures, and new dreams to emerge from the political subjects.

The effort of refounding democracy and saving its fundamental principle of the radical equality of everyone pits Rancière against proponents of consensus democracy who have found several ways to discredit real, unruly subject as it builds consensus on the basis of the rational capacities of only those political subjects who understand. It also pits Rancière against liberal democracy, which argues that the essence of democracy is the enjoyment of civil liberties and economic freedom under the rule of law, the kind of politics that has dominated contemporary politics.

Rancière is an interesting theorist because he shows how politics is about creating subjects who are capable of various, concrete alternatives toward emancipation technically to break from the boundaries that limit who should be included in politics. Positing the idea that politics is political subjectivation is a unique gesture in contemporary political theory where real subjects is often viewed in a negative way, as an unreliable source of politics because of their failure to conform to the ideal of the rational agent. This is a thought-provoking claim that suggests an alternative way of looking at politics through hyper-individualized moments of subjectivity—a politics that is localized, particular, specific, and concrete as it zooms into moments in which individuals decide to perform actions unexpected of them based on their perceived social class or identification. Such a unique claim that politics is about making subjects allows us to think about real politics, that is, democratic struggles for social inclusion, and to conceive ways in which it defines new modes of being subjects.

We learn from the orthodox theory of Rancière that political subjects are those who suffer miscount, those who have been excluded and set aside because the social and political structures, which have been built to organize society, resist them because of specific parts, thereby excluding them from the universal. This subject speaks and reveals the miscount and demands that something

must be done to address the miscount. Rather than emphasize the experiences that make up the miscount or the injustice suffered by the subject, its main task is to disagree, to speak other than expected from their social identity, and to demonstrate that she is capable of thinking on her own for herself. Presented in this manner, it would appear that political subjectivity is a purely discursive performative gesture. However, reading Rancière in the way I propose demonstrates that there is more to the process of political subjectivation than discourse and contestation through the performative gesture of speech.

In Chapter 2, we witnessed the beginning of Rancière's philosophical career as he struggled to come up with his own notion of politics and political subjectivity. He started as an Althusserian Marxist, and in 1964, he participated in the famous seminar on *Reading Capital*, which articulated the classical, Althusserian scientific interpretation of Marx. In this reading, the subject is a mere bearer of ideology and is thus fundamentally mystified. After *Reading Capital*, Rancière started criticizing theoretical positions that favor intellectual mastery and an elitist attitude toward political subjects. This move was triggered by the events of 1968 in France and his intellectual master, Althusser, who insisted, along with the French Communist Party, that the participants in this revolt were deluded.

Althusser is not merely any reference; he is a seminal reference for several critical philosophers up to the present, particularly because of his structural approach that remains influential to many Marxists. Rancière's critique of Althusser is a critique of the tradition of a reading of Marx that renders the subject mystified and in need of representation by others (the critical theorist, the intellectual, the Party). By going against Althusser, Rancière claims that the task of philosophy should not be reduced to that of theoretical police. When it deals with society and the human beings that constitute it, philosophy should not impose prescribed ways of knowing that limit the capacity of subjects to act. The subject, which, for Rancière, during this time is simply 'human,' constitutes the primary material of social theory.



Therefore, there should be no room for intellectual elitism in a theory that promises to liberate the political subjects from the injustice they suffer. Rancière teaches us a key lesson that an elitist critical theory, which remains suspicious of the political subject's agency, leads to a position where class struggle itself becomes ideological so that one ends up questioning the very thing that one is fighting for, i.e., the validity of popular contestations. The process Rancière underwent demonstrates, in a poignant performative fashion, the struggle of a thinker to learn from people who are the source of the contents of a theory. All the while, the thinker also avoids intellectual elitism and struggles to give justice to the experiences of the people without conceiving them as mystified subjects. In fact, Rancière's method of equality is rooted in the very struggles of the workers that he read in the archival work. This tells us how important it is to treat the struggles of the people with the same careful treatment that we give to theories of philosophers. The subject speaks, and if the theoretical inquiry is about political action, the philosopher therefore must listen. Indeed, the political subjects speak about their experiences although there are moments when Rancière refuses to acknowledge these experiences as valid grounds for politics. It is obvious that there is fundamental intuition in Rancière to listen to political subjects in order to know about political subjectivity. In the process, he recognizes their political agency, which has been deprived of them by other political thinkers.

Here, Rancière demonstrates that the entry point to political discourse is made possible through the speech functions and words of workers who are not merely insisting or demanding that they should be heard when they articulate particular demands, but also demonstrating their equality of intelligence. This means that the workers are capable of speech, and they are capable of thinking what their experiences consist in. Rancière reminds us that a political theorist has to assume that people can make their own claims to political justice. Thus, the fundamental lesson here is that political subjects can formulate their thoughts through their own words; they are human beings whose feelings and thoughts manifest in their words. The speech functions of the subjects have concrete references to their experiences. Thus, when they speak, the theorist should not

assume that they are suffering from mystification. Whatever informs the speech functions of the workers are, in fact, the flesh and soul of political struggle.

Rancière's separation from his intellectual mentor Althusser was the first among several disagreements with thinkers who observe an attitude of intellectual mastery and refuse to acknowledge equal intelligence of political subjects they write about. Another philosopher whom Rancière criticized for the same aforementioned reason was Marx himself. Here lies another significant lesson we can learn from Rancière given the continuing importance of Marx in contemporary political philosophy. In particular, we can learn an important lesson on how Rancière read Marx. Rancière began his philosophical career as a Marxist himself. In fact, he was one of the leading people to set up a structuralist reading of Marx, which established a paradigm that remains influential until today. Althusserian Marxism proposes a reading of Marx that is focused on the subject as a structuralist position, therefore empty of experience and inherently mystified. Capitalist structures of production create subject positions, which are ideological. These subjects misrepresent their own experiences because of the categories imposed by the capitalist system. In 1974, Rancière wrote a text criticizing his own position about structuralist Marxism. Refuting his former position and that of his intellectual mentor Althusser, Rancière demonstrated how Marx himself can be used to challenge the Marx of *Capital* by drawing out the idea that there is a "plurality of Marxist conceptualities" in *Capital*. This means that Marx employed numerous discursive strategies to explain the capitalist logic of production drawing out from the experiences of different classes, particularly the many groups making up the working class. Rancière shows us that there is no single and official way of reading Marx's work because the latter was responding as a theorist to the experiences of people and to their actual discourses and actions. Moreover, it is possible to seek for a confirmation of Marx through the real discourses of the people. Marx's reference to the capacity of the proletariat to dream of a future for themselves proves that political subjectivity is not purely discursive. In fact, the sources of the plural conceptualities in Marx's work are the perceivable and visible aspects of political subjectivity, hence of experience in its

multiple dimensions. In addition, the critique of Althusserian Marxism through the revolutionary Marx is a critique of political organizations and associations, which promise to liberate the people but end up doing otherwise because of their refusal to acknowledge that theory owes itself to the people, not the other way around. The plurality of Marxist conceptuality is a direct reflection of the fact that different groups of people speak and that those discourses need to be represented in the theoretical, scientific language of capital itself.

However, Rancière abandons this position and ends up criticizing Marx as he identified contradictions within the Marxist conception of class and politics. As Rancière progressed in his own thinking, it seemed that Marx himself did not believe in the capacity of the political subject to imagine alternative paths to emancipation. Despite the claim that the proletarian class is the class that will end all exploitations, he could not imagine the worker as a poet, writer, founder of an association, or anything other than a worker. In reply to Marx, Rancière teaches us that politics is not created by a specific class with a fixed role and fixed identity but rather in isolated and decisive moments by literally anyone depending on specific situations of “disagreement.” Politics is not a moment “that is yet to come” after a grand plan has been established and everything has been staged. In fact, it is made possible by bodies of subjects who speak and act otherwise than their given identification, and through the process of questioning the structures and orders in place and reintroducing alternative ways of speaking, doing, and being.

Political subjects are far from the miserable, helpless subject that Marx and some Marxists have portrayed them to be. They are, in fact, in charge of a particular role, i.e., the “arguing of a wrong” or the declaration of the existence of equality through their speech by means of disagreement. Moreover, inasmuch as there are numerous experiences, there are also several ways of imagining the political subject. Rancière therefore demonstrates that political subjects are fundamentally capable of anything not because they will be taught by philosophers and thinkers but because they can will themselves to do so. Indeed, it is theorists who learn from political subjects by witnessing their deeds and words.

The chapter that follows the discussion of Rancière's engagement with Marx was on *Proletarian Nights*. This book is a culmination of his ten-year archival work on the writings left behind by workers who were part of the revolutions in 19<sup>th</sup> century France, which toppled governments and overthrew the monarchy. My point in this chapter was to emphasize and explore the richness of political subjectivity through the words of the workers whose writings Rancière discovered in the archives.

The most important lesson in this chapter is that the subject is someone who has feelings, who imagines, and who has found a way toward emancipation amidst exploitation. Here, I highlighted the words used by the workers in the archival work to show their emotions, dreams, and desires, which provided the invisible impetus for the revolts reported in history books. What is even remarkable with these proletarians, aside from the historical fact that they constituted the army of workers responsible for the movements that actually toppled the government, is that they acted on the assumption that they were equal subjects to the bourgeois writers, philosophers, scientists, and artists who kept trying to keep them in their place, even ones such as Victor Hugo who claimed to be on their side.<sup>474</sup>

In particular, the workers borrowed the words of the bourgeois poets and writers, and employed sophisticated literary tropes to express in their writings their passions, dreams, and longings and report on the miserable state of their lives. This was a luxury that was once only afforded to the great laureates of French Romanticism. In this borrowing of words, the workers found a creative path to emancipation through the expression of their affects and thoughts, which they described in their own journals and newspapers. Against the classical accounts of proletarian struggle for emancipation, we learn how tiny emotions that often go unnoticed in the classical accounts of political movements can, in fact, be the beginning of politics. This shows that there is a direct link between militancy and people's experiences in such a way that political subjects, who

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<sup>474</sup> In *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière describes that Hugo claims to be on the side of the proletarians but prefers their silence. The poet wrote about the people but wished for them to remain enclosed in their silence. See. Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, xxx.

can dream of a better life and who can find an escape amidst exploitation, can also sometimes act on their dreams as they demonstrated historically in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the realization of one's capacity to dream and imagine can have perceivable effects in militant movements.

Political subjects are rebels both in words and in action. If they can speak up to point out the wrong of their exclusion, they are equally capable of performing (or not performing—passivity as itself a form of resistance) gestures that would contest this exclusion, i.e., forming associations, publishing their own journals, and coming up with their own philosophies. These are all actions that entail more than merely words. Indeed, we can go deeper than that. In spite of Rancière's attempt not to put too much weight on the bodily aspects of subjectivity, he, in fact, spent much of his reconstructive analyses taking these experiences of the subject as the background of his analyses.

If we read Rancière's orthodox theory of politics and compare it with *Proletarian Nights*, we can notice how subjectivity has been transformed into an empty concept in his later works and how in some of his interviews he has denied that the experiences he refers to in *Proletarian Nights* is the ground for politics. The passages from *Proletarian Nights* I highlighted in this chapter would prove that Rancière was as equally interested with the experiences of the workers as he was fascinated with their words and organizational plans. In fact, Rancière wrote about these workers as if they were the very foundation of his theoretical method. While it is true that discourse is the entry point to politics and political subjectivity, the subjects' speech are often filled with emotions, longings, claims, demand, frustrations, and any other aspects related to being an embodied subject. The unique lesson from *Proletarian Nights* includes the different dimensions of these workers' experiences that inform their own discourse. Underneath the discourse and the words of the workers are negative experiences like suffering both in the bodily and the psychological aspect as well as positive affects of joy, solidarity and love. All of these experiences have obviously played an important role in these workers' struggle for social transformation during their time. That a political subject has affects of sadness, anger, joy and that they are capable of imagining,

visualizing and hoping for an alternative life springs from the fact that they are embodied subjects. This is an amazing claim to find in the work of Rancière who argued in *Disagreement* that political subjects are empty.

In Chapter 5, I endeavored to show how theories of emancipation, which include the affective and the bodily, are often very close to repeating the Althusserian error and to entrenching domination. Another thinker who Rancière spent significant time analyzing for the same reason is Bourdieu whom Rancière exposed the tendency toward domination in Bourdieu's work whose sociological method remains influential to a number of thinkers today. Several thinkers still speak about political subjects in the same manner as Bourdieu, that is, from an objective distance fundamentally suspicious of the subject's capacity to represent accurately her own social position.

This critical confrontation with Bourdieu, who was a central figure in France at that time such as Althusser a decade before, is contemporaneous to Rancière's famous rediscovery of Joseph Jacotot, the founder of the universal method of teaching. Jacotot is pivotal for the conception of the "method of equality." Through him, Rancière rethinks the relationship between knowledge, understanding, and will. This is directly related to the subject of politics as it deals with the question of agency and what a political subject should possess to achieve emancipation. Since everyone can think, anyone can be emancipated, which means that anyone can recognize the conditions of oppression entrenching his existence without needing the explanation of an intellectual master.

This chapter emphasizes an alternative use of the instrument of language for emancipation, that is, to enable the political subjects to demonstrate their equal intelligence. Speaking, improvising, and utilizing language in new ways, which makes any genuine, individual use of language akin in some respect to poetry, the subject verifies his equality of intelligence. In Rancière's work, we can sense a belief in the implicit universality of communication that aims to bring political subjects together in a dialogue. Rancière's approach to language is particularly enlightening because, despite the fact that his theory of politics is close to structuralism and post-

structuralism, which have tendencies to be critical and deconstructive and focused on the negative aspects of language, in the end he regards communication as the setting of a common stage where everyone is equal in principle, from the point of view of the “poetic” capacities for speech. There are no qualifications and requirements of who is qualified to speak. And such “poetic” communication is ‘communication with,’ which means that language is a tool with a specific purpose of establishing a common ground for everyone and not a measurement of intelligence.

Some of the concrete struggles of the workers to translate their feelings, experiences, claims, demands, and hopes into words and any other gestures can be seen as a move to use their “will” toward emancipation. In contrast to the mastery of knowledge, which in several political theories has been regarded as the most effective tool for fighting oppression, the will is more important. Indeed, the beginning of emancipation is available to anyone who can will herself toward it because intelligence is equally available and can be mobilized by anyone to dispute her situation. From Rancière’s example, we learn that it is possible to challenge the fundamental assumptions of traditional pedagogical practice about the hierarchy of intelligence and that, in fact, equality can be verified. The universal method of teaching that Rancière discovered through Jacotot demonstrates that knowledge is not a relationship of intelligence but that of “wills.”

Chapter 5 also provided a new perspective regarding translation as a gesture that serves as proof of a universal capacity for thinking and forms of action. Translation in itself is an aesthetic experience in which the subjects maneuver in between “feeling and expression” to reveal their experiences, emotions, and dreams with the presupposition that they would be understood, since everyone should be presumed equally intelligent. Translation therefore becomes a political gesture as it reveals that anyone can think, speak, and participate in politics. It likewise exposes the wrongness of hierarchies based on knowledge by positing equality as a fact that could be verified by anyone who would will himself to access knowledge. Contrary to the claims of Bourdieu that the possession of cultural capital puts the dominating in a superior position above others, Rancière teaches us that the activity of translation proves that everyone is equally intelligent. Politics

therefore should begin from the verification of equality by recognizing everyone's capacity to speak about their exclusion through their own words. The capacity to translate removes knowledge from the hierarchical relation of power and returns it to the individual political subject who, inasmuch as he is capable of thinking, is also capable of doing.

To speak is to 'witness,' which means to assert the equality of intelligence of an individual subject in understanding the conditions of her existence. To speak is also to enact the encounters of the subject with the world and the other subjects existing in this world through language. When proletarians occupy the stage of politics, it is not an act of speaking for the sake of speaking, but it is about speaking for themselves and the expression of their experiences, dreams, aspirations, and affects by themselves and for themselves, to construct a scene of exchange with others. Speaking is performative; it is not merely speaking but doing or undoing. Speaking is "poiesis," a tool that aims to cause a transformation in the way subjects perceive the social world and their place within it. In addition, what the subjects speak of are not imaginary formulations and manifestations of their delusion. They are, in fact, communicating their lives, sufferings, defeats, triumphs, and hopes for the future. Thus, we should be wary of prescribing a particular way of knowing, and always try to unlearn our presuppositions of inequality rather than view political subjects without exerting effort to recognize what is contained in their speech.

In Chapter 6, the link Rancière establishes between aesthetics and politics demonstrates that there are several ways of being a political subject in modernity. The aesthetic regime of the arts, which is dominated by the democratic letter, has made meaning available to anyone even though it also entails an obscure dimension at the end, in which it collapses and does not quite capture experiences. The subjects Rancière highlighted in his work on *Aisthesis* are far from the accepted representations of what political subjects are supposed to be. They deviate from the pre-given standards in their practices, and this is precisely what makes them political. The shift in the representation of bodies within the aesthetic regime of the arts ushers in a new dimension of political subjectivity, which takes the material condition of the body as a means of expression of



the sensible. The body of the political subject is reinvented into new forms of bodies that arrest, shock, or demand new ways of perception. In their digression and disidentification, modern subjects can challenge the distribution of the sensible and invent new forms of practice that traverse the obscure dimension of meaning to make visible the hidden pathos of life. Translation of the will and feelings is not only done through words. In his later work on aesthetics and politics, Rancière has emphasized the bodily aspect of the political subject as he moves beyond politics as discourse. The plastic form of a sculpture, the images captured by a camera, the immobile bodies of avant-garde theater, and the dance of light of 1900s stage artists, which are among these alternative modes of representing and being a body, challenge established representations and attempt to capture the dilemma and opportunities made available to the subject in the regime of arts.

Rancière's recent work on *Aisthesis* and the political charge of modern bodies might seem highly esoteric and very far from "real" political issues and modes of contestation. However, some famous recent examples come to mind showing how seemingly apolitical individuals or apolitical instances can spark a political revolution. Two of these examples are the deaths of the Tunisian fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi and the Egyptian Khaled Mohamed Saeed. In 2010, the former committed suicide in front of the local government office by setting himself on fire after a series of deplorable events in his life that reached its climax on the day of December 17, 2010. Bouazizi's fruit cart was confiscated, and he was publicly harassed and humiliated by the local police. When he attempted to recover his only source of livelihood, the local officials refused to listen and talk to him. Bouazizi's death started a series of mass protests against the corrupt government in Tunisia, which unseated Tunisian leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. A democratic revolution swept across the nation, which later on led to the Arab Spring. Eight years after the fruit vendor's death, Tunisia is still working out how to deal with the consequences, political and economic, of its revolution.

Another death of a single person in Egypt had the same effect in the Egyptian nation. This time, instead of the body of the political subject itself, it was the image of a dead body that circulated on the Internet, which became pivotal for the Egyptian revolution in 2011. When photos

of the badly beaten body of Khaled Saaed went viral in the Internet via Facebook through the “We are all Khaled Said” page, a series of mass protests started that eventually led to the Egyptian Revolution. Mass revolts ensued against the existing government, and the Egyptian leader Mubarak was overthrown.

These two examples demonstrate how fired-up emotions and affects of people can incite a violent political event leading to a revolution. A number of similarities are notable about these two events. Both individuals were not involved in any political protest nor were they part of an organized political group, but their deaths launched massive revolts that had significant political effects in their respective countries. Both came from a class that is reputedly excluded from what is commonly known as politics. They were able to incite sentiments of sympathy, anger, and frustration among their respective people across the region and even all over the world. And yet their actions were totally opposite. Bouazizi burned himself and demonstrated a visible act of refusal to be treated in the way he was treated. He took an active part in the political act that was done. Saaed, on the other hand, did not do anything. The photos of his dead body were circulated on the Internet through the effort of another political activist who created a page dedicated to his death. There is therefore a difference in the political charge of these two events. Bouazizi’s move was individualist, nihilistic; it did not seem to lead to anything but was a trigger for a massive change. Notably, it was the immolation of his body itself that was the instrument of politics. In the case of Saaed, it was not his body but the representation or the image of his body through the photos that circulated on Facebook that triggered a series of events. Saaed was a passive subject but the images of his body had the same effect, leading to political revolution.

Politics therefore is never apart from embodied subjects. Despite the predominance of pure discourse in several political theories, even in Rancière’s own work, the very core of politics can be rooted in the struggle and confusion of the individual. The demonstration of equality through violent contestations is not the only path possible for politics. There are instances where the passive body in its unwillingness to do anything is a powerful vessel of political action because it goes

against expectations of how a body should behave in a given social situation. The same rings true for overly active bodies, fragmented bodies, mechanical bodies, and the types of bodies Rancière studied in *Aisthesis*. For instance, the fragmented sculpture of a torso, which represents a laid back state of a hero, and a 19<sup>th</sup>-century woman who formed an association of women workers can be both political. Both bodies demand perception as they both question existing perceptions; both bodies interrupt logos. It is in these late writings on aesthetics that we witness Rancière finally referring explicitly to bodies, flesh and speaking bodies, a reference that he underplayed in *Disagreement* and in his interviews.

Artistic practices, as Rancière reconstructs them in the paradigm of modernity, teach the possibility that anyone is, in principle, entitled to say anything at any given moment. They therefore give way to moments of surprise that can shatter already-established standards and rules. The artists and artworks Rancière highlights in *Aisthesis* and his recent writings on aesthetics are similar to the proletarians of *Proletarian Nights* who acceded to forms of experience that had been denied to them before. Now the worker is not the sole representative of the struggle for emancipation. Artists, too, become paradigmatic subjects who struggle to make sense of aesthetic modernity and can show its potentials for political action. These artists have shown in several ways how bodies can be utilized, and they live to disidentify from standard norms by exploring a different side of fragmentation, passivity, fluidity, and silence, i.e., the infinite possible forms and state of the body that effectively question the status quo. This is because there is logos in pathos and there is pathos in logos. The affect of a body lying on the ground, doing nothing can mobilize political contestations. A political subject is an embodied subject who engages in politics through a visible form made of flesh, bones and blood. And it is precisely because of this physical form that it can be made perceivable through action and non-action.

The performative gestures of subjects involve affects, bodies, wills, and dreams. These experiential and somatic aspects of subjectivity make the political subject more concrete and so much more than merely an empty speaking subject. This significant attention to embodied

experience is important for politics of today. Politics, which is based purely on rational discourses of understanding, is limited because it forgets the human aspect of political subjectivity that makes politics unpredictable. The crucial lesson we learn from Rancière then is that when it comes to politics, we cannot rely on fixed procedures and universalized structures for the mere sake of consensus because emotions and affects are as real as thoughts. As a matter of fact, when these feelings and affects are set aside on the premise that they are not enough to ground politics, they may well manifest in the subjects' political action or assertion. Feelings can indeed move the subject to action and disagreement. The main performative task of the political subject, although it has essential discursive dimensions, has consequences not merely in discourse but in perception, which means that the affective aspect of subjectivity is significant in politics. Political struggles have material dimensions, which are perceivable and achievable by the senses.

There are several instances in which politics has been conceptualized using a dichotomy between organized social political movements and the masses who are deemed as ignorant. Hence, there has always been a divide between politics as institutionally organized and individual subjects who are not part of the organized collective. My reading of Rancière defies this conception of politics and tells us that amidst alienation, people can think for themselves and are not devoid in principle of agency despite their preoccupations and the difficulties they experience. This theory of politics is almost unheard of in political theory; it is hardly thematized, and it goes against the grain of classical political theory, notably Marxist theory. Rancière's theory demonstrates how hyper-individualized moments can, in fact, become the ground for politics. Subjective experiences have always been a constitutive part of Rancière's theory of political subjectivation. Although the more famous path to subjectivity is predominantly discursive, we simply cannot deny the fact that the claims of the political subject are rooted in their experiences, and these experiences can be the catalyst for real political actions.

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