

RANCIÈRE AND THE RECUPERATION OF POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

In the work of Jacques Rancière one encounters a welcome and uncompromising return to the question of the political, or politics proper, as opposed to politics in the ordinary sense of the word. For Rancière, the political is something irreducible, where the fundamental equality of all human subjects manifests itself, while customary politics is the perversion of the political in as far as it covers up this equality and institutes in its place a hierarchical arrangement of the *polis*. Hence Rancière’s claim that customary politics is the work of what he calls the “police” (not with the usual meaning), which here represents the agency that parcels out the polis according to the interests of those who have a “part” in it. Rancière’s concern, however, is for the part of the *de-mos*, or those “with no part”, who are at once excluded from politics and immanent to it as its constant other, or shadow. This paper explores the implications of Rancière’s radicalisation of the notion of the “political” – or “politics” in the sense of the democratic pursuit of equality – for the hierarchical, consensual realm of (pseudo-) politics under the “police”, and for the prospects of democracy, especially considering the role of what Rancière calls “dissensus”.

Jacques Rancière is an uncompromising philosopher. Instead of being drawn into the hurly-burly of argumentation regarding conventional politics – local, national or international – he focuses resolutely, in what may be described as a radical phenomenological gesture, on that which is presupposed by everything that happens in the domain of politics, namely what one may call “the political”. It is at one and the same time the condition of the possibility of politics (such as when a political party organises itself before an election with a view to garnering sufficient votes to become the ruling party, or the “government”) and of its impossibility (as in the case of the unexpected, unpredictable event of the “political” irrupting within politics, effectively calling it to account as far as those excluded from its domain are concerned).

This may sound somewhat strange to anyone conditioned to thinking about “politics” and anything “political” as being synonymous, but as I shall attempt to show, this distinction, which is implicit in Rancière’s thinking, is indispensable for any critique of politics. Without it, “politics” can only be accepted and discussed on its own terms (simply rearranging the deck chairs, as it were), which precludes critique, in the sense of assessing something in terms of the question of its “grounding”, even if this ground, the “political”, is an abyssal (non-)ground – in other words, a “foundation” which is simultaneously included and excluded from that which it grounds (in this case politics). If it were wholly part of politics, it could not play the role of constituting and re-constituting its domain as the space where the *political* – the *raison d’être* of politics – irruptively and momentarily brings it back to its originary being, before the pseudo-politics of what Rancière calls the “police” once again exercises its constraining, restraining power of “distributing the sensible” (Rancière 2010: location 499) along hierarchical lines; that is, structuring the experiential world along cratological (power-related) contours of exclusion and inclusion.

My argument about the “political” constituting the quasi-transcendental condition of possibility *and* impossibility of “politics” – in both the conventional meaning of the term (which Rancière associates with the “police”) as well as the transgressive meaning with which it is endowed in Rancière’s work – is indebted to Jean-Luc Nancy’s (and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s) use of the term in their work at the Paris *Center for Philosophical Research on the Political*. Since the early 1980s at the *Center*, they have set out in various ways – through lecture-series, discussions and publications – to pursue “...what we have provisionally called *the essence of the political...*” (quoted in Armstrong 2009: 1). Their elaboration on this clarifies my own use of the concept of the political: “...the question of the political discloses...the necessity of interrogating what makes the social *relation* possible as such; and that is also to say...what does not constitute it as a single or simple relation... (which is never given), but which implies a ‘disconnection’ or a ‘dissociation’ at the origin of the political event itself...” (quoted in Armstrong 2009: 1)”. As Armstrong (2009: 3) explains, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe made it clear that they were not interested in commencing with any existing conception of the political, but envisaged a kind of “retreat” and “retreating” of the notion “...in its simultaneous appearance and withdrawal, its ‘appearing disappearing’ or its placement and displacement...”. This is precisely the sense in which I believe “the political” is constantly at work in Rancière’s thinking on “politics” as that which disrupts the exhaustive management of social space by the so-called “police” – a management that masquerades as “politics”, but is in fact predicated on its neutralisation.

A different (but accurate in terms of Rancière's) way of saying this is to assert that, for Rancière, genuine *politics* (in which the *political* is constantly active) would ceaselessly promote the democratic ideal of equality, in contrast to the politics practiced by “the police”, which pays lip-service to democracy and equality while arranging the common life of citizens according to a selective, hierarchically privileging accounting of the *demos* or people. Tanke (2011: 42-43) describes Rancière's position in political thinking as follows:

It defends the idea that ‘politics’ should be reserved for democratic forms of organisation, communication, practice, and action. This means that politics is distinguishable from other ways of ordering the community by its most basic element, equality. Without equality, distributions, operations, and discourses partake of the opposite of politics, what Rancière calls ‘the police’...a play on the Greek word *polis*. It designates those distributions erected in order to support selective accountings of the city. The police maintains the fiction that no one of any significance has been prevented from taking part in the determination of the common life. For Rancière, politics is the process by which the ‘part of those without part’ counter all such counts based upon their exclusion...politics is the process of disrupting the distribution of parts and roles through a claim about the equality of anyone with everyone...what Rancière is describing is the *de-mos*, the very subject of politics. The *de-mos* is a political subject inasmuch as it is capable of exceeding and thereby undermining the police’s accounting. Whereas the police defines the *polis* as unified and whole, politics consists of contesting the very definition of the community.

What I want to claim here is that, for the *de-mos* to be a political subject “capable of exceeding...the police’s accounting”, that is, the actual organisation of the community according to parameters arrived at by “consensus” (more about this below), it may be said to be constituted by the “political” as such, and not merely by politics in the banal, everyday sense of the term. What Rancière enables one to grasp, is that what commonly passes for politics is, at closer inspection, a subtle, mostly imperceptible way of constantly covering up the very possibility of an originary politics where its sustaining – now appearing, now “retreating” (Nancy) – power, the “political”, is excluded and relegated to the level of the invisible and the unsayable.

An analogy with two themes addressed in the work of Jacques Derrida would clarify what I mean here. First, for Derrida there is an indissoluble tension between justice and the law, where the one marks the limits of the other (Caputo 1997: 132-133). He does not deny the need for the law, but insists that what he conceives of as an “impossible justice” is

indispensable for the law to do its work, as it were. When a judge has to make a decision in a criminal case, therefore, she or he has to do so by making use of the law, and often depends on previous cases of a similar nature to assist them in their decision. However, because every “case” is unique in space and time, regardless of similarities with others, what the judge has to do is to “suspend” the law momentarily in order for justice to do its work – only by doing this, that is, by ignoring the universalist terms in which the law is phrased, can justice be done to the singularity of the “case” in front of them. This is why, for Derrida, an “impossible justice” enables one to deconstruct laws (uncover their contingent circumstances of provenance, as well as their countervailing necessity, the one limiting the other reciprocally), and inversely, the very existence of laws makes justice fleetingly possible, on condition that the laws are temporarily put in abeyance to allow the unrepeatable phenomenal-historical parameters within which the “case” is inscribed, to manifest themselves and inform the judgement. As Caputo points out, the implication of this paradoxical relation between justice and the law is that, just as justice would remain impotent without the law to mediate it, the law would be tyrannical without justice making it receptive to difference (Caputo 1997: 136).

In the second place the same paradoxical relationship obtains, for Derrida (2001: 3-24; Olivier 2012), between two types of hospitality – an unconditional, “aneconomic” hospitality, that welcomes the stranger into the home with no strings attached, and an “economic”, conditional hospitality that accepts strangers into a home or country on strict conditions. Neither of these is possible in absolute purity: just as the “pure” sway of law as well as the “pure” instantiation of justice, respectively, would make a truly human society impossible, aneconomic, unconditional hospitality requires the mediating force of law-conditioned hospitality to have any hope of actualisation, and conditional hospitality has to allow a modicum of excessive, unconditional hospitality to inform it from time to time, lest it forfeit the very possibility of being described as “hospitality” at all.

Against this backdrop one could say that, for Rancière, there is a similar relationship between politics as epiphany of the “political” and conventional or “police-” politics: the political can only irrupt, or show itself as such, at the moment when police-politics is temporarily “suspended”, as in the case of a revolution or an insurrection, and politics can only be practised when that “impossible” thing, which it owes its very possibility to, namely the political, continually limits its totalisation (as effected by the “police”), accompanying it like a shadow. Like Derrida’s conceptions of justice and of aneconomic hospitality, the political therefore has a kind of irreducibility or unconditionality about it, while conventional politics is always conditional upon agents occupying its cratologically striated space and

traversing its specific “distribution of the sensible”, which is ineluctably of a hierarchical nature. Only the irruption of the political is capable of shattering such hierarchies, in the process allowing “equality” – or, what amounts to the same thing, politics as “democracy” to make its appearance. Of the relation between the police and politics (which manifests the political), Rancière observes (2010: location 499):

...Politics stands in distinct opposition to the police. The police is a distribution of the sensible...whose principle is the absence of void and of supplement.

The police is not a social function but a symbolic constitution of the social. The essence of the police lies neither in repression nor even in control over the living. Its essence lies in a certain way of dividing up the sensible. I call ‘distribution of the sensible’ a generally implicit law that defines the forms of partaking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed. The partition of the sensible is the dividing-up of the world (*de monde*) and of people (*du monde*)...

It is not difficult to see in this use of the term “police” a play on the ancient Greek word for the city-state, namely, “*polis*” (as Alain Badiou has shrewdly observed; Tanke 2011: 42). It was after all Plato and Aristotle who formulated what even today counts among the most influential ways of “partitioning the sensible” without leftover. In Plato’s case, for example, this was to be done along the lines of clearly identifiable “classes” of citizens, described in *The Republic* (Plato 1991: 93-94) – philosopher-kings (guardians as rationally governing rulers), soldiers (guardians as “auxiliaries” or protectors) and the commercial or productive class (merchants, farmers and craftsmen) – a division of social space such that no one could conceivably fall outside its scope, especially because these three classes putatively corresponded exhaustively with the tripartite structure of the human soul (see Melchert 1991: 131-138), namely reason (the ruler-guardians), spirit (the auxiliary-guardians, protectors or soldiers) and appetite (the commercial class). Plato’s proposal for the “distribution of the sensible” in the *polis* is justified by the so-called “noble lie” (Plato 1991: 93-94) regarding the dominant “metal” in the soul of each person born in the *polis*, namely gold (rulers), silver (auxiliaries) and bronze (commercial class), and is phrased in terms of a mythical account of their physical provenance in the earth, intended to persuade the citizens to accept it as vindication of the exhaustive division of the city into three classes (see also Tanke 2011: 27-31 on Rancière’s understanding of Plato’s archetypal, “unequal” division of society).

Those passages in Plato's *Republic*, referred to earlier, where the necessity and content of the "noble lie" are under discussion by Socrates, Glaucon and others, are paradigmatic instances of what Rancière describes as "the distribution of the sensible" – Plato's philosophical discourse projects social and political divisions powerfully in an anticipatory manner, preparing the way for the arrangement of the space of the *polis* into hierarchical spaces of rule and subordination. All discourse, as well as art, has the capacity to do this; think of the way that a country's constitution functions discursively in this manner, for example (where "discourse" and "discursive" denote the principle, that language is never innocent – power and meaning converge in language as discourse; see Foucault 1982: x). Moreover, for Rancière philosophical (more broadly, all theoretical) discourse stands in a relation of reciprocal epistemic dependence, the one (philosophy or theory) constituting the condition of comprehensibility of the other (literature and the other arts) and *vice versa* (Rockhill 2011: 5; Olivier 2013) In Rancière's own words (2011: 31), "The simple practices of the arts cannot be separated from the discourses that define the conditions under which they can be perceived as artistic practices". This constitutes the field of convergence within which the "distribution of the sensible" is enacted.

Aristotle, too, distinguished among different kinds of government (such as monarchical tyranny, oligarchy and democracy) in the *Politics*, where he gives one a good indication of his approach to politics. He says (2009: Book IV, Chapter II, location 41568):

...in treating of the different forms of government, we have divided those which are regular into three sorts, the kingly, the aristocratical, the free states, and shown the three excesses which these are liable to: the kingly, of becoming tyrannical; the aristocratical, oligarchical; and the free state, democratical...

Aristotle further points out that there are many different kinds of democracies and oligarchies. Interestingly, he associates one kind of oligarchical government with government by the rich, and democratic government with government by the poor, or what he also calls the "freemen" (2009: Book IV, Chapter IV, location 41616). For present purposes it is noteworthy that there are significant tensions in his political thinking. On the one hand there is this observation, which is ostensibly compatible with Rancière's insistence on equality as the hallmark of democracy, in fact, of politics (or what I would claim to be the political) itself (2009: Book IV, Chapter IV, location 41677):

The most pure democracy is that which is so called principally from that equality which prevails in it: for this is what the law in that state directs; that the poor shall be in no greater subjection than the rich; nor that the supreme power shall be lodged with either of these, but that both shall share it. For if liberty and equality, as some persons suppose, are chiefly to be found in a democracy, it must be most so by every department of government being alike open to all; but as the people are the majority, and what they vote is law, it follows that such a state must be a democracy.

On the other hand, however, Aristotle (2009: location 41677) clearly prefers a different species of democracy, which is less susceptible to what he sees as excess in the shape of the influence of demagogues on the people's rule as described above, namely one where democratic government depends on laws. Here criteria of eligibility and exclusion (such as 'infamy') may apply to the election of magistrates who apply the laws, for instance. In fact, he goes as far as stating that (2009: location 41689):

...where the government is not in the laws [but "in the votes of the people"], then there is no free state, for the law ought to be supreme over all things; and particular incidents which arise should be determined by the magistrates or the state. If, therefore, a democracy is to be reckoned a free state, it is evident that any such establishment which centres all power in the votes of the people cannot, properly speaking, be a democracy: for their decrees cannot be general in their extent.

So much for the "pure democracy" of the people (*de-mos*); Aristotle's preference clearly lies in a less "pure" democratic system where certain controls are built into the system of governance. But what does "the people" or *de-mos* entail for Aristotle? Is it the subject of politics in the same sense as it is for Rancière? Clearly not, if one recalls what is easily overlooked by reading the usual contemporary meaning of the word into Aristotle's use of it, namely, that "the people" whose votes are the law in what he terms a "pure democracy" did not, for him, include women and slaves, but only free, adult men. When Aristotle (2009: location 41677) speaks of citizens who have "rights", he does not include women and slaves. This is apparent where (throughout Book I of *Politics*, 2009) he discusses the relation of governance between masters ("freemen") and slaves in terms of the question of the "nature" of the slave, which, compared to the master's natural facility with language, participates in an inferior manner in reason (*logos*), sometimes also comparing it with the relation between men and women, or between a man and his wife (e.g. Aristotle 2009: location 40097, 40109,

40134; see also Tanke's (2011: 50) discussion of Rancière's interpretation of this aspect of Aristotle's philosophy). When Rancière writes about "the part of those without part" (Tanke 2011: 42-43), this is the kind of thing he seems to have in mind – the "part" that those excluded from the common life of society by "the police" can legitimately claim in the name of equality, or in the name of politics in the true sense (or the political), which amounts to the same thing.

In the ancient world such a claim to equality assumed the irruptive form of the slave revolt under the Thracian gladiator, Spartacus, the Gaul, Crixus, and others (c. 109-71 BCE), which resulted in the Third Servile War against the Roman Republic (73-71 BCE), recorded by various historians, including Plutarch and Appian (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spartacus>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_Servile_War). This constitutes a paradigmatic instance of the political manifesting itself irruptively in the context of the conventional "partitioning of the sensible" that prevailed in Hellenistic Roman times, in the process asserting the irreducible equality of those who were systematically excluded from society by the reckoning of the "police". Another way of putting this is to say that the slaves under Spartacus' leadership were claiming the "part" in social life that they had been denied. It may be the case that the contemporary world does not sanction the practice of slavery (although news reports occasionally suggest that it does exist in interstitial form), but for Rancière extant society, no less so than before, systematically "distributes the sensible" through the symbolic "police" function along hierarchically exclusionary lines, in the process establishing spaces that deny the *de-mos* their "part" of the *polis*. The radicality of Rancière's thinking lies in its capacity to unmask the hollowness of contemporary systems of governance, that they are "democratic", or that they represent "politics".

The parcelling-out of the community according to divisions which accommodate people who buy into the principles underpinning the divisions in question, makes those (with "no part") whose position is incompatible with such principles invisible and inaudible in the sense that what they attempt to draw to the attention of the "politicians" (the agents of the "police") cannot, in principle, be heard or registered in the discourse of the latter. Understandably, therefore, the police is at pains to prevent the *de-mos* – the true subject of politics – to make its appearance, and when it does, everything possible is done to discredit it. This is part and parcel of contemporary politics, too – of what Rancière pointedly refers to as the politics of "consensus"; which may be a stab at Habermas, who has famously advocated "consensus" as the goal of communication in general, expressed in a terse sentence in *Knowledge and human interests* (Habermas 1971: 314): "Our first sentence expresses

unequivocally the intention of the universal and unconstrained consensus.” Contrast this with Rancière (2010: location 1364): “Consensus is the form by which politics is transformed into the police.”

This may seem counter-intuitive: most people would agree that consensus or agreement is the ultimate objective in all political negotiations. Not so for Rancière. Consensus is in fact a means of exclusion, in as far as, more often than not, it functions not as the goal to be attained by means of “political” negotiations among everyone in society (as liberal political theorists claim), including the dispossessed, the homeless, and the poor, but as something operating from the beginning as a fortification against (genuine) politics. The political core of the latter would break apart the apparently seamless configuration of society because its irruption disrupts the consensual exclusion of the *de-mos* unequivocally and irreducibly. In a passage that confirms Rancière’s disagreement with Habermas (regarding what the latter valorises as “communicative action”; Habermas 1987), he observes (Rancière 2010: location 532):

The essence of politics is *dissensus*. Dissensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible itself. Political demonstration makes visible that which had no reason to be seen; it places one world in another – for instance, the world where the factory is a public space in that where it is considered private, the world where workers speak, and speak about the community, in that where their voices are mere cries expressing pain. This is the reason why politics cannot be identified with the model of communicative action. This model presupposes partners that are already pre-constituted as such and discursive forms that entail a speech community...

Dissensus therefore opens up a gap in the sensible sphere where *consensus* is the means by which the “police” manages the social sphere from the outset by means of exclusions and prohibitions, and by means of prior definitions of what constitutes speakers and interlocutors. As Tanke (2011) reminds one with reference to Rancière’s work, the consensus on societal divisions and functions promoted by the “police” operates according to a process of de-politicisation. So, for instance, one is told that “salary disputes are private matters between workers and employers” (Tanke 2011: 46), even when the thrust of worker demands for better salaries (so prevalent in South Africa today) is the genuinely political one of expressing the desire to be included in the society that systematically excludes them, despite claims to the contrary. After all – so the counterargument would go – they can vote in elections, can’t

they? Mere voting in a “police” system where the elected “representatives” continually reinforce the existing partitioning of society through economic legislation is no sign of freedom, or of politics in Rancière’s sense. In fact, for Rancière the possibility of politics in this sense is receding more and more because of the suffocating effect of “consensus”, as Tanke (2011: 46) points out:

Rancière describes ours as a ‘consensual time’ to indicate that the logics of de-politicization are becoming more sophisticated and politics itself more difficult. He has set his conception of politics in opposition to a specific variety of consensus prevalent today: the discourses ascendant since the fall of the Berlin Wall that attempt to legitimate the unrestricted reign of the market. This form of consensus employs a particular series of operations to convert democratic struggles into a series of managed conflicts. It frequently exploits the cover of political realism, the doctrine that justifies war, social hierarchies, and economic inequalities by invoking necessity...It is the ideology that claims to be beyond ideology, one which would have us believe it is now possible to base government on a pragmatic estimation of human nature, the market’s laws, and the global situation. We witness a version of realism whenever leaders exploit the imperatives of modernization, economic necessity, or notions such as the ‘post-9/11 world’ to justify unpalatable decisions. Realism gains traction by promoting itself as the efficient alternative to the chimeras of democracy. Our managerial states are its agents and our corporations, its primary beneficiaries.

Does this sound like a characterisation of a familiar state of affairs? It should, because in South Africa we witness, on a daily basis, a multitude of ways in which our very own representatives of the “police” engage in “partitioning the sensible”, making sure that what the *de-mos* claims as belonging to it in the light of the equality of everyone with everyone, does not fit into the realm of the sayable. And this rests on prior, tacit “consensus”, that there is no need for politics as the unconditional assertion of equality, because “mechanisms” and policies exist that can deal with all exigencies in the (pseudo-) political realm. The recent Marikana massacre may be regarded as a paradigmatic instance of the functioning of the “police” within the context of such pseudo-political, consensual managerialism.

But, with present-day South Africa in mind, would it be consistent with Rancière’s understanding of politics – as “disruption” of the hierarchical domain of the “police” – to regard *all* kinds of disruption (such as the violent protests, accompanied by burning of houses and other objects, against lack of service delivery in 2014 in South Africa) as an index of “politics”? Not necessarily, according to Tanke’s (2001: 50-51) interpretation of Rancière’s

position:

Not every disruption, however, is worthy of the name ‘politics’, and Rancière reserves that term for actions, speech situations, manifestations, practices, arguments, and even works of art and literature that inscribe equality into the policed divisions of inequality...For Rancière, only the supposition of equality allows for speech, action, and organization to break from the police. Without equality, such operations are quickly subsumed by the non-political competition between parts...Politics is opposed to the police in that it employs a fundamentally different logic. Rancière describes this opposition in terms of ‘worlds’ in order to highlight the fact that the police and politics are essentially different orientations toward the community. The police proposes an order founded on the assumption of the inequality of the community’s various members. It attempts to naturalize the miscount according to which some are prevented from taking part. Politics, on the other hand, employs an egalitarian logic to break with the subject positions demarcated by the police. The guiding assumption of politics is the equality of anyone with everyone. ‘Doing politics’ consists of placing the two logics in conflict, that is, creating spaces where the two can be opposed and the police hierarchies overturned – however provisionally. The political [*le politique*] is this third space of contestation, an indeterminate and always shifting meeting point of the police and politics [*la politique*]. [This justifies my earlier distinction between the *political* and *politics*; B.O.]

The question, which disruptions of the prevailing order are ways in which the political shows itself, therefore seems to depend on whether claims to equality are discernible in them. Rancière provides several clues regarding the recognition of such equality in terms of “demonstration”. One such clue has to do with the *logos* as understood by the ancient Greeks, namely as “speech” and “account” (among other things, for it also meant “reason”). In *Disagreement* (Rancière 1999: 22-23), he argues that the *logos* in this dual sense may be shown to be the very condition of the possibility of “politics” among the Greeks: on the one hand, it means *speech*, but on the other also the *account* (that is, interpretation) that is given of this speech. Is it understood as speech, the human faculty associated with questions concerning justice – capable of articulating what is just and unjust, reasonable and unreasonable – or is it accounted for, or perceived, as mere noise, or perhaps (less drastically, but still effectively hierarchising) as a “lower” species of speech, fit for acknowledging instructions regarding manual labour, or as an inchoate expression of rebellion, but not for speech as rational discourse? As pointed out earlier, in Book I of *Politics*, Aristotle (2009) justified slavery in terms of the natural inferiority of the slave to the master in terms of *logos*

- the slave could “perceive” *logos*, but insufficiently to be able to “possess” it (Rancière 2010: location 523).

It is not difficult to discern in the machinations of the “police” of today comparable contemporary accounts of *logos* or speech, such as when the revelations of Edward Snowden (in 2013) pertaining to unjustified NSA spying on millions of Americans as well as citizens of other countries, is derogated as being unreasonable, if not illegal in terms of American “security” (read: hierarchical military superiority), or when, in South Africa, the Marikana miners are relegated to the position of being less worthy of legal representation at state costs than the police. When signs of *logos* as speech are evident, however, the *political* character of politics is perceptible, and with it an unequivocal expression of equality. People who engage in acts of mindless destruction and looting play right into the hands of the “police” by opening themselves to judgement in terms of existing legislation, instead of articulating their protest as *logos*, in which their equality is registered.

It may come as a surprise to those steeped in the modernist belief (Habermas 1985: 9), that the aesthetic belongs to its own distinctive discursive sphere, alongside the ethical/political and the epistemic or cognitive (a division ultimately going back to Kant’s three famous *Critiques*, each of which laid the foundation, in the 18th century, for these three spheres of distinctive logic and competence), to find Rancière (2007: 560) claiming that dissensus (and therefore politics, of which it is the essence, as pointed out earlier) is an *aesthetic* matter. The grounds on which he can do this are connected to his expression, “the distribution of the sensible” (referred to earlier), which alludes to the manner in which the “sensible” realm of the perceptible world is “partitioned” into unequal “parts” – parts that cannot be separated from social, cultural and political separations (think of apartheid’s “partitioning of the sensible”), and which are inseparable from *logos* or speech, from writing as well as from the visual arts. All of these are complicit in the “distribution of the sensible” – the arrangement or rearrangement, along “aesthetic”, sense-perceptual axes, of the perceptible world by means of lines of inclusion and exclusion, subordination and elevation, repression, suppression and oppression. The “distribution of the sensible” therefore also refers to the “sensible” world in a different sense, namely that of the world of “sensible” people, those who adhere to the dictates of common sense.

As briefly intimated above, the irruptive impact of the political on this “sensible” realm therefore represents, for Rancière (2007: 560), a moment of “dissensus” (or “dis-sensus”) – the aesthetic disturbance, interruption, disruption or dislocation of the “normal”, sensible parameters regulating social life as sanctioned by the “police”. The “aesthetic” character of

politics – the flipside of which is the political character of the aesthetic in the shape of the arts, including literature – therefore resides in the capacity of images and language to “order”, organise or arrange the visible, perceptible world in various ways, most of which have usually been “police” variations of a hierarchical kind. It is not difficult to see that philosophy and literature (see Olivier 2013), for example, participates in this – Rancière (Tanke 2011: 27-34) leaves one in no doubt that philosophy from Plato and Aristotle until modern times (think of Hobbes’s monarchical absolutism, and even of Kant’s support for an enlightened despotism, among others) has largely been complicit in the unequal “partitioning of the sensible”. What is the function of “dis-sensus”, then?

As already intimated, according to Rancière (2007: 560), it is performed in an aesthetic manner. It does not only have the meaning of a difference of opinion or “disagreement”; it means a breach of, or “rupture” in the sensible order – a clash between one (the established) “sensible” order and another, which disperses the arrangements of the sensible world by the “police”. It appears that, for Rancière, this should be understood as a conflict between one distinct manner of organising or structuring the world shown to us by the senses and another, on the one hand, and on the other, a contest or struggle between two orders – the “sensible” (sensorily perceptible and commonsensical) apprehension of the world, and one that, in principle, is calibrated and attuned to a fundamentally different arrangement of the sensible. This further explains why Rancière (2007: 560) conceives of “dissensus” as a matter of poetic, creative or aesthetic “invention”. It also casts light on his interpretation of “poetic invention” as a rupture or dis-placement of existing “places and identities” (Rancière 2007: 560), and not primarily as the conjuring up of an imaginary, non-existing *topos*. In the final analysis, he reminds one, this makes of dissensus also a political matter.

Lest anyone should think that the present, succinct characterisation of Rancière’s thinking on politics – with its singularly conceived similarity to art in terms of the aesthetic – has nowhere met with any criticism or “disagreement” (one of Rancière’s own valorised concepts), I should hasten to point out that, even among commentators who have shown an appreciation of his originality, critical engagements have emerged. Among these a pertinent example is Bosteels, who does not hesitate to uncover a divergence – he calls it a “profound asymmetry” (Bosteels 2009: 161) – between Rancière’s concept of politics and that of art, which otherwise seem to be united through the sensibility-structuring function of the aesthetic as an autonomous experience. In his elaboration on this claim, Bosteels (2009: 162) argues that the famous three regimes of art distinguished by Rancière display a diversity that one fails to encounter under the rubric of the political; on the contrary, he claims that it is

perfectly possible to adduce a kind of enduring, universal and non-historical “kernel” or “condition” of politics itself. The three regimes of art include the ethical regime of images (where images are censored in the name of the community’s putative ethos, as in Plato’s work), the representative regime of the arts (where a hierarchy of representation characterises the arts, corresponding to social hierarchies), and the aesthetic regime of art (where all subjects, styles and objects share in an aesthetic legitimacy of equality; Tanke 2011: 75-85; Olivier 2013). Given the divergent treatment of art as subsumed under these three “regimes” – with the aesthetic regime opening up a veritable “insurmountable plurality” of possibilities – as opposed to the absence of such divergence when politics is at stake in Rancière’s work, Bosteels (2009) claims, one cannot justify the misleading implications of the homology between art and politics in terms of aesthetic experience.

Hallward (2009) is equally critical of Rancière, despite his appreciation of the originality of his work. He points to the pervasiveness of the concept and metaphor of the “theatre” in Rancière’s work, particularly in relation to the meaning of politics and equality (Hallward 2009: 139-142), and after discussing at length the sense in which the latter’s notion of equality may be regarded as “theatocratic”, he formulates some of the problems raised by this. There are seven “overlapping” senses in which equality evinces the rule of the theatre in Rancière, according to Hallward (2009: 146-151). First, equality as manifestation of the political is “spectacular” insofar as it “configures its own space”; far from being invisible, Rancière insists, it finds ways of being seen. Secondly, like theatre it is “artificial” inasmuch as it is not natural, but in a way anti-nature, and thirdly, it valorises “multiplicity over unity” because just as there can never be just one theatrical identity, democracy cannot speak in just one voice. The “voice of the people” is a myth, just as one “emancipatory knowledge” is. There are always several forms, just as there are multiple discursive strategies employed by capital, for instance. In the fourth place, equality and politics are “disruptive” (which is one reason why Plato was hostile to it) because, as every genuine theatrical performance does, it inescapably subverts “the great police project” of allocating to everyone their “permanent” place in society. Fifthly, just as a theatrical performance is “contingent” insofar as it must “invent” (or reinvent) the stage anew, the political staging of equality must unavoidably proceed without prior consensus or agreement – in this sense it is contingent or “of the moment”. The sixth and seventh theatrical attribute of equality in politics are that it “tends towards improvisation” and that it “operates within a liminal configuration”, respectively. In other words, just as theatre succeeds most when improvisation is not absolutely suppressed by direction or choreography, political equality is most apparent when it eludes the confines

of the “police” through the “freeplay” of improvisation. And to say that equality emulates theatre in its liminal logic is to affirm its refusal of being identified as X or non-X, and instead opting to operate in the “gap” between the two, that is, “blurring” the distinction in rigid identitarian terms. An actor who identifies conclusively with one interpretation of a role leaves her- or himself no room for inspired improvisation, just as a political actor who relinquishes this theatrical “space” will be hamstrung by the straitjacket of a political identity. Instead, according to Rancière, when one acts politically, instantiating equality, however ephemerally, she or he occupies a place “between themselves and their role”, as Hallward (2009: 151) puts it.

There are several related difficulties that follow, in Hallward’s view (2009: 151-157), from this theatrocracy of the political. The most important of these include the obvious problem, that it can at best be “sporadic and intermittent” because of its lack of “political determination” and of the power to “impose measurable change”. Then there are the questions, whether the emphasis on the theatrical could possibly have a critical edge in today’s “society of the spectacle”, instead of being reduced to something merely (and ineffectually) “transgressive”, and of the incompatibility of Rancière’s emphasis on interruption and improvisation with attributes which no “sustainable political sequence” can do without, such as mobilisation, organisation and decision-making. Hallward (2009) further argues that Rancière’s indifference to such attributes is intimately bound up with the fact that his egalitarian stance requires of him to ignore questions of “knowledge, skill or mastery” that cannot be separated from political action – something that glosses over the lingering question of the relation between theory and praxis. These are important criticisms, but they testify less to a fundamentally flawed political-philosophical project on Rancière’s part than to the recognition of its importance and actuality.

The preceding, brief characterisation of Rancière’s thinking on politics, the political and the “police”, articulated in terms of concepts such as “aesthetic”, “dissensus” and “consensus”, should be seen as being merely a first adumbration of the fecund terrain of political thinking that he has already mapped out, and is still in the process of extending and refining. The pertinence of his uncompromising thinking, which clearly challenges traditional philosophy on several matters of importance – such as those briefly introduced here – is beyond doubt.*

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