

The Political Basis of Rancière's Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. The aesthetic writings of French philosopher Jacques Rancière have, in the last few years, received increased attention from both philosophers and artists alike. Concepts such as “event”, “distribution of the sensible” and “the aesthetic” are *de rigueur* in contemporary theory and practice. However, little attention has been given to the political context and purpose of Rancière’s aesthetics. This is a significant oversight as I argue that the political aspect of Rancière’s aesthetics is its fundamental basis. The terms on which Rancière approaches aesthetics are from the beginning consistently political. This context is the grand-narrative of the goal of political emancipation central to Althusserian Marxism. Rancière firmly opposes Althusserianism as being mere continuation of oppression, insofar as it institutes and maintains a split between the masses and their emancipation. For Rancière the aesthetic, as that which has been denied, when reconsidered on equal terms, is a potential site of emancipation. Political emancipation, therefore, is to be seen in the literature of the oppressed. Such work constitutes an event for Rancière whereby the autonomy of the subject is born and aesthetic asserted. Only by premising Rancière’s aesthetics in this way can we begin to explain and understand his position on aesthetics and aesthetic concepts.

When approaching the aesthetics of Jacques Rancière it is vital to understand the particular politicised context from where they originate. This context is the grand-narrative of the goal of political emancipation central to Althusserian Marxism. For Rancière this goal is an influence and not a doctrine. Rancière formulates his own terms on which political emancipation is to be fought for. Specifically, these terms are “event”, “equality” and

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“the aesthetic”. Furthermore, it is this focus on the political that explains why Rancière is less concerned with the nature of the aesthetic object than its operation within a politicised context.

Emancipation, for Rancière, presupposes a radical equality whereby those who have not been included in the political count are made to count. It is this goal of political emancipation, premised on equality, which is the general Marxist influence in Rancière's writings. Equality, Rancière learns from the example of Jacotot as we shall see, “is not a goal to be attained” (Guénoun *et al*, 2000: p. 3). It is, instead, the basis of political change.

For Marx, change is accounted for in terms of “historical materialism”. This, of course, is a method of studying social and economic change that focuses on developments in collective production. Production is understood as not only generating the material, but also the social, conditions of life. This is because the fact of production itself produces the relations of production whereby the master and worker are separated. One traditional implication of this idea is that a change in the economic conditions of production can produce a change (as seen in the difference between feudalism and capitalism) in social relations, perhaps even herald human emancipation. Implicated here, for Rancière, as we shall see, is aesthetic production and theory. The divide between the producer (and consumer) of the aesthetic and the artisan is vital to the operation of gross inequalities and slaveries. Furthermore, the classic discourse of aesthetics has served to reinforce the political and class distinctions that the goal of emancipation opposes. As such, the aesthetic is a battleground on which the fight for emancipation is to be fought.

The assertion of the role of the subject of emancipation crystallises Rancière's politics as a negative reaction to Althusser. Althusserian Marxism, Rancière argues, has not overcome an unequal approach to emancipation. Instead, Althusser is seen, by Rancière, to have posited a form of Marxism devoid of the subject. By this model the poor (proletariat) are to be led to emancipation by a Leninist vanguard. For Rancière though, the revolution is not a scientific act to be directed by experts. Rather, it is to be an aesthetic act where each subject is equal from the outset.

Althusserian Marxism insists on the role of the masses as a single unit, seeing the individual as an ideology of the *bourgeoisie*. By Althusser's approach “...the masses must rely on the wisdom of the Party.” (Rancière,

2011 [1973]: p. 10) This is an account of history devoid of individual agency. Rancière claims that Althusserianism's main political outcome is the continued subjection of the individual to a dominant regime of power. Even if that regime is revolutionary, Althusserian Marxism demonstrates for Rancière an inevitable oppression.

The political effects of Althusserianism are clear; the undermining of the autonomy of the individual and the maintenance of a regime of distinction and domination. Central to the operation of Althusserian Marxism is the equation of the Party with the working class. This equation serves to, in effect, eliminate the concerns of the working class. For Rancière this is a lesson in history that shows philosophy to be complicit in the subjugation of the masses chiefly because it insists on a process devoid of a subject. By restricting class struggle to theory, philosophy institutes a class division that secures the dominant role of the philosophers, intellectuals and Party leaders. This technical split necessitates a social division. In the figure of the leader of the revolution (and the Party in general) Rancière identifies a means for the continuation of oppression. Subversion, in effect, begets oppression.

The inherent problems with the Althusserian position are identified by Rancière when he presents the dilemma of "who will educate the educators?" (Rancière, 2011 [1973]: p.5). In other words, who will dictate the "dictatorship of the proletariat"? The answer to this problem will require Althusser to give some account of individual agency.

Althusser instead cuts through the Gordian knot of the problem of the subjectivity and creativity of the masses by insisting on and instituting a Marxist "science" whereby emancipation is guided intellectually, scientifically and clinically from above. In other words theory (Althusserian Marxism) will educate the educators.

However, a virtue of Rancière's writing is his insistence that the cut between theory and practice is not so simple. By not addressing politics directly, Althusserianism would always be a fragile form of Marxism. More problematic for Rancière, as a result of separating practice and theory, Althusser has removed the masses from their own emancipation. This is a project now left to the intellectuals, the teachers, the Party etc. Rancière, in effect, accuses Althusser of abandoning the cart for the horse. In this system, theory is sacrosanct and where it does not match practice this is

not a failure of theory.

His emphasis on politics, history or more precisely social practice, helps Rancière to put into question the very notion of orthodox Marxism. Instead he insists on a plurality of Marxist approaches and discourses. In this context the discourse of Althusserian Marxism can be regarded as but a lesson in one kind of orthodox order. Contrary to Althusser's position "...there is no pure Marxism, ... Marxist discourse has always been infected by social practices, inflected by discourses and practices of revolt – whether of workers in Paris in 1871, workers in Moscow and Petrograd in 1905 and 1917 or peasants in Hunan in 1926 – and inflected by disciplines and discourses of power." (Rancière, 2011 [1973]: p. 123)

This referencing of various different historical revolts by Rancière is significant. It is Rancière's way of using practice to problematise Althusser's rigid theory. Written in the context of what Rancière calls the "May 68 storm", his first book, *Althusser's Lesson*, revels in the limitations of applying "Marxist science" to this particular event. Althusser's primary failure in this storm is his inflexible advice to those engaged in political combat to wait for the theory to catch up. In Rancière's words "...philosophy simply cannot wait. The urgency of the situation demands that it takes risks." (Rancière, 2011 [1973]: p. 57)

"Marxist science", thus is a peculiar science. It is an unquestioning science that cannot deal with empirical facts that challenge existing theories. It cannot accommodate history, the autonomy of the individual or the masses. In short, Althusserianism is a science devoid of self-criticism.

This lesson in orthodoxy and the primacy of the Party is rightly recognised by Rancière as an updated version of Plato's philosopher-king thesis in the *Republic*. The goal of Althusserianism is thus that Party leaders become philosophers (by which he means "Althusserian Marxist scientist" administrators), and that philosophers become Party leaders. By splitting thinking from producing, the Althusserian Marxist position institutes a split between the masses and their emancipation. For example; if the students and the workers of '68 are responsible for the actions of May, the bourgeoisie are responsible for the accompanying theory. The role of the party then is to become the "vigilant advisors" to history. Unless this happens no revolutions will be possible.

Given the later development of Rancière's philosophy it is clear that

the lesson of Althusser constitutes what Rancière would call an event. The event, for Rancière, is to be understood in term of the Marxist goal of emancipation. The event for Rancière is the revelation and assertion of the subject and therefore the basis of equality. Aesthetics, philosophy, education and the political, are seen by Rancière as operating, conditioning and reinforcing inequality. Even the emancipatory politics of Althusserian Marxism is considered guilty of this, insofar as it maintains the split between the leaders of the revolution and the proletariat. Equality, thus, is a premise and not a goal to be attained. The assertion of the role of the subject of emancipation crystallises Rancière's politics as a negative reaction to Althusser. Althusserian Marxism, Rancière argues, has not overcome an unequal approach to emancipation. Instead, Althusser is seen, by Rancière, to have posited a form of Marxism devoid of the subject.

By this model the poor (proletariat) are to be led to emancipation by a Leninist vanguard. For Rancière though, the revolution is not a scientific act to be directed by experts. Rather, it is to be an aesthetic act where each subject is equal from the outset. It is in this context that Rancière's focus on the worker begun here and later seen in *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Duke University Press, 2003 [1983]) and *The Nights of Labor* (Temple University Press, 1989 [1981]) makes sense. In the former Rancière places the Althusserian split between the revolution and its leaders in the context of the history of philosophy. In the latter, Rancière privileges the subject (and the subject's aesthetic inclination as seen in the culture of the working class) instead of the theoretical structure, as the beginning point of emancipation. This, Rancière would claim, is because human emancipation is in part trying to break free from the theoretical structure. Furthermore, it is also the lesson of Marxism, or better yet, a more appropriate way to read Marxist historical materialism, namely, through the subject. It is this structure, in this case Althusserian Marxism ("Marxist science"), which Rancière regards as akin to the count of the operative regime and the crimes of philosophy.

In *The Nights of Labor* Rancière focuses on the aesthetic and nocturnal activities of a group of French factory workers in the 1830's to show that the ordinary worker has concerns beyond the mere functional. The ordinary worker has an equal aesthetic inclination as any member of the bourgeoisie. It is the assertion of this that opens up a space of political

dissent. The poetic transgression by the worker is the essence of dissent, for it is this that truly alters the proletariat's relationship to work and by relation their standing as a subject. No longer is labour understood in terms of function or use-value, but entire catalogues of possible (paradoxical and unexpected) aesthetic experiences are present. These experiences are not to be understood as beautiful, sublime etc. but as we shall see, in being politically embedded, they have an evental structure. This approach to the working class sees Rancière himself dissenting from Structuralist Althusserian Marxism.

For example, one such worker, among the countless, is locksmith Jérôme-Pierre Gillard. By writing on behalf of the workers and signing his writings "*worker locksmith*", "Gillard symbolizes the entrance of working-class representatives into the realms of politics and culture and their continuing loyalty to their fellow workers" (Rancière, 1989 [1981]: p. 4). This is because he is both poet and worker, a combination unrecognised by the prevailing status quo. As such, he assumes a considered position of emancipation. In the words of Rancière: "alongside the enslaving chains forged by the books of civil and religious law there are other ties woven by other books: chronicles of heroic actions, collections of poignant sorrows, albums of delightful emotions" (Rancière, 1989 [1981]: p. 110). In short, the aesthetic, as that which has been denied, when reconsidered on equal terms, is a site of emancipation. Political emancipation, therefore, is seen in the literature of the oppressed.

The reasoning for this is as follows: for emancipation to be attained, the popular classes need to prove in the eyes of their rulers (the counters) that they are more than just a productive force to be wielded like an instrument by the intelligent class (see Rancière, 1989 [1981]: p. 263). Such proof is available in the aesthetic and cultural interests (letters, poems, colonial and philanthropic societies, thoughts...etc.) of the everyday worker. It is from these works that the connection between the political and the aesthetic is established in the cause of human emancipation. It is via the aesthetic (and the night, as the time of the aesthetic) that a subject is born, expressed and established. This subject is one that does not fit into the simple oppressive count of modern capitalism. Workers, after all, are expected to be sleeping during the night. For Rancière, the generation of this subject is the core of emancipation. This is because politics is

the assertion of a place in the count of the regime of power by those that have been allocated no part. It is this aesthetic assertion that is a political act. Crucially, this is not the straightforward expansion of the franchise but rather, the development of the status quo based on radical equality. This is achieved by asserting a gap in what Rancière will later call “the distribution of the sensible”.

The workers are not to be mere actors in the revolution whose lines are already written in theory but rather, they are to direct the cause of human emancipation. In *The Philosopher and His Poor* and later *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), it is the poor who think. It is those designated a part of no part in the operation of philosophy that Rancière is keen to include. This is because, for Rancière, the dominant tradition of philosophy (as seen in Plato, Marx and Sartre) and later sociology (Bourdieu) has been one of elitism, sexism, racism, ageism etc. In the words of Hewlett: “Philosophy is [...] a justification of domination” (Hewlett, 2007: p. 90). Just as the poor are not recognised as equals, their art, words, music and games also go unrecognised. In fact, these are terms on which they are not recognised as equals. This realization is the basis on which the problem of politics and aesthetics comes about in Rancière and we can see that it is a realization that began with his response to Althusser.

Within this approach to politics, the idea that equality is better understood as an axiom, rather than a goal, is best articulated in the experience of Joseph Jacotot. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* Rancière relates the story of Jacotot. Jacotot was a French teacher who had to leave France for political reasons and ended up in Flanders. Although he and his Flemish students share no language, a bilingual text (*Telemachus*) enables him to teach French across the language divide. The success of the students in mastering French convinces Jacotot that people share an equality of intelligence. This is an equality of qualitative capability (as opposed to quantitative equality). Admittedly one still needs the skills to negotiate the space of the ignorant schoolmaster; for example, you need to speak Flemish and the enthusiasm and commitment to learn in the first place. Only then we can see this space as one of radical equality.

Nonetheless this peculiar experience (we might say event) enables Jacotot to see equality because he has had to forgo the standard hierarchal position of the schoolmaster. This hierarchal position is one that, follow-

ing from his analysis of Plato *et al*, in *The Philosopher and His Poor*, Rancière sees as denying equality. The first thing that the classic Platonic student/teacher relationship institutes is the “enforced stultification” of inequality. This process of imposing distance is explained best in the following passage; “In the pedagogical process the role of the schoolmaster is posited as the act of suppressing the distance between his knowledge and the ignorance of the ignorant. His lessons and exercises are aimed at continuously reducing the gap between knowledge and ignorance. Unfortunately, in order to reduce the gap, he has to reinstate it ceaselessly” (2009 [2004]: p. 7). This gap is ceaselessly reinstated because only the master can validate that the student has attained knowledge.

It is for this reason that, for Rancière, equality is a premise and not a goal. For if equality was to be a goal then the (school) master could legitimately assume charge. Such a capturing of power would effectively ensure the enforcing of a world of specialisation whereby the workers would be limited to being mere workers, barred from being philosophers, artists, engineers etc. This is a specialisation supported by Althusser. This approach “denies philosophy to the disguised slaves who actually are free artisans” (Rancière, 2003 [1983]: p. 37). There is for Rancière, no partition between the worker and the thinker. The capacity to multi-task is one equally held and establishes the human subject as actor on the political stage. Rancière, thus, reconfigures the division of labour as a political partition that is replicated in the aesthetic. The aesthetic operates as the final barrier (the ultimate philosophical justification) between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. It is that which is most secure in being denied the proletariat.

As May notes, “To act out of the presupposition of equality is to challenge our institutions and our political traditions in the name of those who are not its beneficiaries...” (May, 2008: p. 3). Rancière’s conception of equality is firmly rooted in action, unlike theories of distributive justice; Rancière focuses on an equality of engagement. Distribution is, for Rancière, almost a pejorative term. It is the means by which inequality is enforced. The maintenance of consensus is the specific style of the contemporary distributive state. Politics is about equality, not distribution.

The poor then, for Rancière, are not simply those that labour but rather, are those that are not counted as equal. The fundamental question of human emancipation is specified as: “how can those whose busi-

ness is not thinking assume the authority to think and thereby constitute themselves as thinking subjects?" (Rancière, 2003 [1983]: p. *xxvi*). Emancipation can be thus seen as emancipation from specialization, not of trades but of social orders. Specialization Rancière argues, plus the absence of leisure time, are central to accounts of the worker in Plato and philosophers and political economists in general, and serve to preserve the status quo.

These later texts can now be seen as provoked from the failure of Althusserian Marxism to engage with the empirical facts of the politics and aesthetics of emancipation. *Althusser's Lesson* is the beginning of such a project in relation to the events of May '68 and earlier struggles, such as the rebelling silk workers of Lyon in 1831. In Lyon the workers resisted the term 'slave' when describing their position as it barred them from being counted as free citizens. Such actions, argues Rancière, demonstrate a clear ability to think and be aesthetic agents on behalf of the workers. This is the assertion of the subject in history. This emphasis on language is important because Rancière identifies philosopher as occupying the position of "word-keepers".

Rancière's approach to language (*disensus*) is thus equally important. The language of the worker is assumed equal to the language of the masters (for example, philosophers) and is read as such. This approach is only possible because Rancière has insisted on a radical equality. Rancière's approach is not a meta-narrative because equality is not an all-encompassing explanation for the operation of the world but rather, a premise required for a politics of human emancipation.

The practice of politics can be read in terms of what is counted aesthetically, in terms of what expression is permitted recognition. Both actions, the political and the aesthetic, can be performed in the service of emancipation. In fact, for Rancière, it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate each from the other. It is in the political and aesthetic engagement with the gap in the count of the status quo that the subject emerges and is emancipated. For Rancière, "the political always comes into play in questions of divisions and boundaries." (Guénoun *et al*, 2000: 4). The aesthetic is useful because it is the element that can best welcome political change.

The aesthetic is the representation of the count of the prevailing political regime (and later it is also the name given to the specific regime of

the sensible that marks our current reality). In this convergence of the political and the aesthetic around the concern of emancipation based on equality, Rancière's approach to the idea of the event takes shape.

The event, premised on equality, for Rancière is a way to reconfigure the Marxist goal of emancipation after the death of Marxism. Beyond the exhaustion of the worn out Scientific Marxist approach to emancipation, there is a Marxist emancipation that has remained un-thought and un-practiced. This is the event aesthetically premised on equality. This is historical materialism based on equality. In re-imagining equality Rancière is re-imagining Marxism as a way to offer a critical interrogation of the classical concepts of the left. In theoretical terms this re-working entails a new conception of the political and an abandonment of the idea of a communist (or any leftist) vanguard as anything but unhelpful for the working class to achieve emancipation. Thus, to the Marxist commandment that philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world and the point is to change it, Rancière does so by reinterpreting Marx in terms of aesthetics.

This is done by focusing on the idea of the event where the equal status of the subject is asserted as the premise of political emancipation. The articulation of subject for Rancière is dependent on the event. A subject, for Rancière, is one that is included in the count of the prevailing regime. The significance of the event is that it can disrupt the operative regime and institute a new regime. It is by this process that new subjects are recognised. For Rancière, the subject is emancipated via the event and it is this event that is politics, not the crude wielding of power. The event, as that aesthetic moment of disensus means that the subject is born out of disagreement and an aesthetic assertion.

It is only by accounting for the specific political context of Rancière's aesthetics that the significance of this position becomes clear.

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