"Reading Ranciere's *Disagreement* Today: Politics, Policing, and the Extreme Right"

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1. Politics That Does Not Command

Since the publication of his last book-length political polemic, *Hatred of Democracy* (2005), the work of Jacques Rancière has generally focused on developing the conceptual and historical features of his account of aesthetics. With the recent publication of his 2009 debate with Axel Honneth, *Recognition or Disagreement?* (2016), we have good reason to return to his political thought as it is outlined in *Disagreement*: *Politics and Philosophy* (1995) and related texts such as his "Ten Theses on Politics" (1998). Programmatically speaking, Rancière conceives of politics as a practice of dissensus enacted in the name of equality. But in examining the debate between Rancière and Honneth, Jean-Philippe Deranty and Katia Genel have recently sought to reframe Ranciere's account of dissensus in the terms of Honneth's theory of recognition. Drawing on the subtitle of *Disagreement*, it is necessary to critique Deranty and Genel both at the level of politics and how this politics implicates philosophy. Elsewhere, I have already indicated how reframing dissensus as a form of the politics of recognition undermines the radicality of Ranciere's methodological commitments.[1] I will not revisit these claims here. Instead, I would like to dispel the assumption that makes this "recognition" reading—as one variant of a generally liberal reading of Rancière—possible. On this assumption, Rancière holds that dissensual speech *is* political action. As Deranty writes, "politics in *Disagreement* is a battle of justifications, mainly a battle about what counts as justification and who is entitled to proffer and expect justifications."[2] But Ranciere's work isn't about how to distribute social goods and allocate

duties and entitlements to such a degree that we will willingly accept inequalities in our societies. So I will argue, by contrast, that for Rancière speech functions as a metonymy for a broader praxis of egalitarian, dissensual politics. More specifically, I will contend that Rancière's egalitarian politics entails two forms of praxis: the symbolization of equality through dissensus *and* the subversion or elimination of relationships of command, coercion, or force implemented by regimes of policing.[3]

Here I aim to demonstrate how Ranciere's account of policing has the conceptual tools to show the coercive and latent violence in apparatuses of policing such as the state (manifest for example in the judicial system, the penal system, and police enforcement), work under capitalism, and—taking his analyses in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* seriously—pedagogy. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but these examples are often routine fixtures of many our everyday lives—and cops, work, and pedagogy happen to enforce lines of command or orders which carry punitive consequences. But there is a second sense in which this list is not exhaustive. I would argue, given more space, that the way that these apparatuses of command impinge on our lives varies according to social norms that, whether or not they are also to a degree latently coercive, guide, direct or legitimate how cops or work or pedagogy impinge more frequently and/or more intensively on some bodies rather than others. Thus I will assume that the reader takes it for granted that in the United States or Canada (and elsewhere, obviously) we cannot provide a complete analysis—and more importantly, we cannot organize effectively against oppression and domination—of a justice system, work, or pedagogy without addressing how the norms of heteropatriarchy, anti-black racism, settlerism, and ableism privilege some bodies and marginalize others.

Then, to conclude, I will argue that, by emphasizing the way that egalitarian politics combats reified structures of command, coercion, or force, we can have done with the spurious objection—raised by Jodi Dean—that Rancière's politics is, at best, *merely symbolic*. I have titled this section "Why Fascism Isn't Politics" because I conclude by showing how Rancière's work demonstrates that fascistic or quasi-fascistic movements such as the alt-right are not *political* but rather contemporary parapolitical modes of social policing.[4]

In what follows, I will argue that political mobilization against command and coercion plays an important role in Ranciere's account of politics in *Disagreement*—when politics is enacted, it is not merely symbolic, but it also it undermines or combats relations of command and coercion. By focusing on how politics is always "doubled,"[5] confronting relations of coercion and forms of symbolization, we can also demonstrate the coherence of Ranciere's claim that politics is heterogeneous to policing even though it possesses "no objects or issues of its own;" indeed, that "its sole principle, equality, is not peculiar to it and is in no way in itself political."[6] Politics is heterogenous to policing insofar as it combats relations of command and coercion. But politics also has no objects or issues of its own because it enacts the supposition of equality in such a way that raises a dissensus about common objects or issues; it takes terms such as *justice* or *democracy* and opens a space for their symbolization that departs from what they mean within a police order.

Rancière draws a sharp distinction between politics and the police. In *Disagreement*, he defines the police as:

> an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity

is visible and that another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.[7]

Policing is a stratified form of organizing what Rancière calls a "distribution of the sensible" (*partage du sensible*). As Rancière notes, distribution or partition (*partage*) is to be understood, first, as both sharing and division of the sensible (*aisthesis*), and then, second, as an account or count of how this *aisthesis* is shared or divided. A distribution of the sensible orients socially lived experience; it defines the roles, actions, places, and meanings of those within a given community. Policing involves distributing bodies and roles, but it also symbolizes these relations in a specific manner; as an apparatus of symbolization, policing allots ways of speaking, acting, and being and delimits speech and noise, visibility and invisibility, existence and inexistence.

We have thus far said little about what Ranciere's politics involves, because that is the point at issue in our discussion. However, there are two programmatic claims we can begin with:

1. "Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination; it makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard [*entendre*] a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood [*entendre*] as discourse what was once only heard [*entendu*] as noise."[8]
2. Politics involves an "open set of practices driven by the assumption of equality and by the concern to test this equality."[9]

At issue is *how* politics relates to policing, and I have deliberately chosen two passages that leave this question open. Nevertheless, we can glean that politics involves enacting the supposition of equality and that it involves some form of distributing bodies that subverts

the distribution within a given regime of policing. I will argue, in more detail below, that for Rancière, politics (*la politique*) is egalitarian insofar as (a) it symbolizes equality by introducing new ways of relating subjects, places, and objects; and (b) it resists, disrupts, and subverts social relations of command.

We will focus on two points in *Disagreement* where Rancière analyzes the performative contradictions of relations of command. Not only do these passages demonstrate that command and coercion are, for Rancière, part of the police order, but they also echo arguments found in the rich tradition of francophone anti-colonialism. The first passage appears at the end of Chapter 1, when Rancière contends that all forms of inequality are historically contingent. Though the Western tradition of political philosophy has sought to naturalize these inequalities, all social stratification is premised on a contradiction:

> There is order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must comprehend the order and you must comprehend that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you. It is this equality that gnaws away at any natural order.[10]

A command institutes the difference between those who command and those whose task it is to obey. And commands are coercive because they carry the implication of retribution if they aren't carried out: unemployment is one tangible result for a worker who does not obey orders at work. And yet all commands imply a performative contradiction. On the one hand, an order indicates a power differential between those who give orders and those who are supposed to follow them. On the other hand, despite this asymmetry those who command performatively concede that those who obey understand them. Therefore relations of

command and inequality are paradoxical: to command requires dividing humanity into (at least) two categories—those who command and those who obey—but to make this division legible, those who command must assume the intellectual equality of those who command and those who obey.

In the second passage, Rancière analyzes the performative contradiction of the "false interrogative" "Do you comprehend?"[11] This analysis plays an important role in Chapter 3, "The Rationality of Disagreement," situated as it is within a broader polemic against Habermas. While this polemic has drawn the attention of numerous scholars, I consider Matheson Russell and Andrew Montin's analysis to be the most concise and attentive account of their differences.[12] For Habermas, they write, the theory of communicative action is to provide the normative foundation for a discourse that aims for the mutual recognition of interlocutors "as equals with respect to their capacity for rational speech and rational evaluation of speech."[13] Though mutual recognition and the ideals of communicative action are attenuated by concrete circumstances, Habermas believes that partners to a communicative understanding cannot ultimately refuse these ideals while availing themselves of the legitimacy and warrant provided by them. Rancière, then, undermines Habermas's framework by demonstrating that, for "common understanding" to be reached by interlocutors in an intersubjective setting, "it is not necessary for the speaker to presuppose the equal standing of the hearer as a partner in dialogue. An understanding may just as well be reached on the presupposition of the hearer's incapacity as on the presupposition of their capacity to participate in rational discourse as an equal."[14]

To illustrate this problem, Rancière points toward the speech situation in which the question "Do you comprehend?" functions as a technique for distinguishing between those

who command and those who obey. As Russell and Montin point out, the question presumes that the addressee is incapable of rationally contributing to a dialogue about the implicit command framed as an interrogative—it is presumed that the addressee could only disagree on the basis of a misunderstanding or failure to comprehend, but not for good reasons.[15] I agree with their gloss on the problem, but I think their conceptual choices are not incisive enough in this case. A command need not assume prior inequality between interlocutors; it *produces* this inequality. As Rancière writes, as a command, "Do you comprehend?" "draws a line of division [*partage*]" between two senses of the word *comprehend* and two categories of speaking beings; it makes it understood to its addressee(s) that there are those who comprehend and those from whom the speaker expects a response and those whose task it is to follow orders.[16]

We are, however, not only interested in how command produces inequality, but also how the implicit supposition of the equality of intelligences that is also communicated by a command can be politicized. Rancière notes, while analyzing the meaning of "Do you comprehend" that the term *comprendre*—like many other expressions concerning comprehension or understanding (*entendre*)—needs to be interpreted nonliterally; instead, it should be understood ironically.[17] More specifically, he contends that disagreement can emerge when "Do you comprehend?" is understood (*entendre*) both literally and ironically. He argues that the addressee must understand her relation to the enunciator in order to know whether the question "Do you comprehend?" requires a response to the problem at hand or whether the content of the question is, "It's not up to you to comprehend; all you have to do is obey.'"[18] but it is precisely this understanding that comes into question when politics enacts the rationality of disagreement.[19]

Rancière argues that disagreement is possible insofar those who (are supposed to) obey can simultaneously understand and not understand the command. By instituting the division between those who command and those who obey, an order also falls into a performative paradox that cannot eliminate the possibility of disagreement. That is, it is possible for those who obey to accept both the received meaning of what command entails (the distribution of command and obedience) and how command subverts itself by both presupposing and disavowing equality. In other words, an order cannot eliminate the gap between "the capacity to speak and the account of the words spoken."[20] Rancière argues that there is a supposition of capacity—the supposition of equality—that must be assumed for an order to work. However, the supposition of equality can be *politicized* and *symbolized* by contesting the paradox between the performative and symbolic functions of an order. Rancière illustrates how disagreement can arise when those who obey receive an order:

> We comprehend that you wish to signify to us that there are two languages and that we cannot comprehend you. *We perceive that you are doing this in order to divide the world into those who command and those who obey*. We say on the contrary that there is a single language common to us and that consequently we comprehend you even if you don't want us to. In a word, we comprehend that you are lying by denying there is a common language.[21]

We see in this passage evidence of the claims I made at the outset: first, while a command can reproduce the inequalities already instituted within a given police order, this passage also demonstrates that, for Rancière, in a situation where no prior relation of inequality is instituted a command *produces* relations of inequality. Then, we also see the ambiguity of inequality: for an order to be obeyed, the addressee must comprehend the order and that it

must be obeyed. However, to understand this order, the addressee must already be the equal of the enunciator. This is, he states, how equality "gnaws away at any natural order."[22]

Through this analysis of the problem of command, it is now possible to interpret what Rancière means when he states that equality is not particular to politics—and that equality is also supposed once an order has been given. In conceptualizing the problem in this way, we adhere to a practical interpretation of equality without having to substantiate it as the ontological foundation of social order. When Rancière states that politics and policing are heterogeneous, he means that politics and policing involve different practices of relating to equality. While policing suppresses equality by imposing the division of those who command and those who obey, politics works to disrupt, undermine, and eliminate relations of command. Though politics and policing are heterogeneous, this heterogeneity must still be staged between them. By differentiating between political symbolization and practice, Rancière can paradoxically hold that politics and policing are heterogeneous while maintaining that "politics runs up against the police everywhere."[23] It is through symbolization that a place emerges for these two heterogeneous dynamics to meet, and it is because symbolization is historically situated that Rancière needs not search out political claims that explicitly take equality as their object. Instead, he argues that politics "has much more to do with literary heterology, with its utterances stolen and tossed back at their authors…than [*contra* Habermas] with the allegedly ideal situation of dialogue."[24]

Why Fascism Isn't Politics

Now that I have made the case that Ranciere's politics involves both the symbolization of equality and the struggle against coercion, I would like to address Jodi Dean's Leninist-

Lacanian interpretation of his work.[25] Clare Woodford has already responded to Dean's critique in detail. As she points out, Dean takes what Chambers intends to be a virtue of Ranciere's work—that politics can never be pure because politics takes place within spaces that are also policed—as its main failing: "'politics' is weak and ineffective because it is always *infected* by the ordering it wishes to challenge and can never therefore overturn that ordering in a *meaningful* way."[26] Woodford rebuts two problematic aspects of Dean's interpretation that rest upon terminological equivocations. First, Dean equivocates between two meanings of *politics*, assuming that any meaningful politics must be a politics of taking power, while for Rancière politics takes place through the enactment of the supposition of equality. Woodford rephrases their differences to show that Ranciere's politics focuses on how the supposition of equality can be employed to undermine the stratified ordering of the police while Dean defines effective politics, in Ranciere's terms, as building "better police orders."[27]

Then, Dean also equivocates between two distinct definitions of *democracy*. For Rancière, democracy is a synonym for politics: not a "set of institutions," but the "forms of expression that confront the logic of equality with the logic of the police order."[28] By contrast, Dean argues that democracy an institution:

> If the dominant order presents itself as democratic, if the order of the police is the order of democracy, then only non-democratic stagings of disagreement can be political since only they set up a contrast with the conditions of their utterance. Far from exclusively democratic, politics can be fascist, anarchist, imperial, communist.[29]

As Woodford notes, politics in Ranciere's sense cannot be fascist, anarchist, communistic, or democratic in the way we refer to these terms as forms of instituting political practices;

instead, "politics is exclusively democratic (in Ranciere's new usage of the term) because it is based on the universal claim to equality in a way that none of these ideologies are" (or could be).[30]

Given the very public re-emergence of the extreme right in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere, I would like to dedicate my own analysis to Dean's claim that politics, in Rancière's sense, could be fascist. I think she can only arrive at this possibility through substituting a psychoanalytic concept of policing for Ranciere's own. As we have seen, for Rancière, policing is both the institutionalization and symbolization of inequality. By contrast, as I suggested above, the Lacanian model conceptualizes policing *first* as a repressive force, and *then* as a force that subsequently distorts all attempts to symbolize the social order. Or, in Lacanian terms, Dean argues that democratic politics—by attempting to outflank the limited form of democracy implemented by the dominant order—plays out at the level of the imaginary or the symbolic order and thus cannot challenge the real: the inequalities produced by the socio-economic system of capitalism and imperialism. Thus, *for Dean*, while Ranciere's appeals to democratic politics are already captured within the symbolic co-ordinates of the dominant order, fascists break the symbolic deadlock by articulating demands that undermine the conditions of their utterance.

Arguing that fascism is not already part of the dominant order, especially given that the ongoing history of nation-building in the United States readily involves the ideology and institutions of white supremacy and settlerism, is a really bad take. Rancière would not draw this conclusion; nor does Žižek in a discussion of fascism that is embedded in his own critique of Rancière.[31] So how does Dean get there? In my view, at this particular point in her argument, in attempting to show how Ranciere's politics is merely symbolic, she attempts to

refute his work by discursive, symbolic means. Therefore, on her terms, given that the symbolic coordinates of American political discourse are always couched in democratic terms, only political movements that symbolize their politics in anti-democratic terms do so in terms not already included in the system—hence Rancière should be led to the conclusion that fascism is, on his account, *politics*. Yet when Dean claims that fascism, especially since she seems to imply its American variants, articulates its demands in terms that cannot be accommodated by the system, I ask: which part of the system? She cannot be referring to the parts of policing in the United States that are imbricated in structures of patriarchy, settler colonialism, and anti-black racism. The only way she can draw this conclusion is by reducing politics, at that point in the argument, to its symbolic and discursive elements. In other words, when Dean treats Ranciere's work as abstract and symbolic it is her account of politics that becomes abstract and symbolic. Given that we are diametrically opposed to everything that these fascists, the alt-right, and their alt-light cronies stand for, the stakes are too high to concede the point on the status of their attempts at protest and social mobilization. Any kind of social mobilization that implements, or aims to implement, coercive and inegalitarian social relations cannot be *politics*. And, as the leading antifascist critic of the alt-right, Matthew N. Lyons shows, the fundamental goals of the alt-right include retrenching the coercive and hierarchical practices of white nationalism and patriarchy.[32] Thus on Ranciere's terms the alt-right is not political; it's a form of policing. In fact, we can phrase this more stringently—the alt-right movement cannot be political, it can only be a parapolitical social mobilization aimed at policing others.

But the problems raised by the reemergence of a very public fascist, white supremacist social movement in North America extends beyond conceptualizing how they are

parapolitical forms of policing. They also bear on our left politics. Hence I cannot accept Dean's assumption that any politics that does not aim at taking power is not politics. In Dean's defence, I would note that the terrain of both what the left counts as politics and what the left counts as policing has shifted since "Politics without Politics" was published. And I would note that I recognize the so-called crisis of the left as Dean articulates it; it stems from a frustration with how the anti-globalization movement that shut down the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999 was unable to relay that victory into a broader social movement, and with how the antiwar movement following 9/11 was largely phrased as registering dissent against the Bush administration's version of American imperialism.

Today, however, I would hardly say that the left (as broadly speaking as possible, as either organizers or accomplices) is in a crisis of praxis—as numerous movements such as #blacklivesmatter, #idlenomore, #NoDAPL, the prison abolitionist movement, and antifascism, among others, take aim at the forms of latent state and capitalist violence that I have discussed above—while also situating the injustices of the state or the police as they are operative within a broader system of imperialist, antiblack, heteropatriarchal, settlerist norms. My point isn't that any of these movements or the motives of their organizers are "Rancièrean," but rather that they are guided by a similar discontent with the status quo *and* with prominent reformist frameworks such as the politics of recognition. And that it would inimical to the way these movements are organized and to their goals (combatting forms of state and capitalist coercion and violence) to suggest that taking power is immediately more *political* than combatting the kinds of violence and injustice enacted by both the state, capital accumulation, and the parapolitical mobilization of the alt-right. And given that many of the movements that I've mentioned have roots in decades of political practices in North America,

it seems that any discussion of the "crisis of the left" must always self-reflexively implicate the way that our perceptions of politics—what, precisely, has *value* and what doesn't; what makes the antiglobalization movement a synecdoche of the Left rather than some other movement; or what leads authors, as even I claimed above, to claim that the terrain of politics has shifted without stipulating *for whom*, when often the *for whom* is in question—are often shaped by our own positions in academia and society in general. I do not mean to make Dean the martyr for the sins of academia, but when she contends that the left has played into its own victimization and when she suggests the metonymic chain "We protest. We talk. We complain. We undercut our every assertion, criticizing its exclusivity, partiality and fallibility in advance as if some kind of purity were possible" epitomizes leftist criticism, she's not sensitive to the way that this characterization can be used, has been used, and will be used *by leftists* to forestall direct action from marginalized groups and their accomplices and silence leftist criticism from marginalized voices within our often tenuous communities of solidarity.[33]

This talk is part of a larger essay, forthcoming with Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy [http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/index.html].

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[1] Devin Zane Shaw, "Disagreement and Recognition between Rancière and Honneth," *Boundary2 Online*, March 13th, 2017 [https://www.boundary2.org/2017/03/devin-zane-shaw-disagreement-and-recognition-between-ranciere-and-honneth/]

[2] Deranty, "Between Honneth and Rancière: Problems and Potentials of a Contemporary Critical Theory of Society," in Axel Honneth and Jacques Rancière, *Recognition or Disagreement*: *A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality, and Identity*, ed. Katia Genel and Jean-Philippe Deranty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 54.

[3] Given that he does not use "symbolization" as a technical term in *Disagreement*, I have adopted this usage following Rancière's remarks in Rancière, *The Method of Equality*. Trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 119–121.

[4] The terminological choice of "parapolitical" here is deliberate (for reasons explained below), since the white nationalists of the alt-right frame their racism, (hetero-)sexism, and ableism as merely representing the *interests* of their particular interest group rather than the retrenchment and intensification of forms of oppression and marginalization of all bodies that fail to meet the norms of white, ableist, settlerist, heteropatriarchy as they are articulated by forms of policing in both the United States and Canada.
[5] Cf. Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 57–74.
[6] Rancière, *Disagreement*: *Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31. When I have modified translations I will signal "tm" in the citation, except in the cases in which I have silently modified the translation, despite the occasional clumsiness it produces in English, so that instances of *comprendre* and its cognates are translated as *to comprehend* while instances of *entendre* and its cognates are translated as *to understand*.
[7] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 29.
[8] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 30.
[9] Ranciere, *Disagreement*, 30.
[10] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 16.
[11] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 44.
[12] See Matheson Russell and Andrew Montin, "The Rationality of Political Disagreement: Rancière's Critique of Habermas" *Constellations*, Vol 22/4 (2015): 543–554; Deranty, "Jacques Rancière's Contribution to the Ethics of Recognition," *Political Theory* 31/1 (2003): 136–156; Dean, "Politics without Politics," 89; Paul Patton, "Rancière's Utopian Politics," in *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene*: *The Philosophy of Radical Equality*, ed. Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross (London: Continuum, 2012), 132–133.
[13] Russell and Montin, "The Rationality of Disagreement," 543.
[14] Russell and Montin, "The Rationality of Disagreement," 545–546.
[15] Russell and Montin, "The Rationality of Disagreement," 546.
[16] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 45.
[17] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 44.
[18] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 45.
[19] Rancière, *Disagreement*, xii.
[20] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 46.
[21] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 46 (my emphasis).
[22] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 17.
[23] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 32.
[24] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 59.
[25] Judging from her comments in *The Communist Horizon*, the formulation "politics without politics" echoes Zizek's claim that "the key 'Leninist' lesson today is: politics without the organizational form of the Party is politics without politics." See Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012), 9; Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*. (London: Verso, 2002), 297.
[26] Woodford, "'Reinventing Modes of Dreaming' and Doing: Jacques Rancière and Strategies for the New Left," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 41/8 (2014): 823.
[27] Woodford, "'Reinventing Modes of Dreaming' and Doing," 829.
[28] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 101.

[29] Dean, "Politics without Politics," 92.
[30] Woodford, "'Reinventing Modes of Dreaming' and Doing," 821.
[31] Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 200.
[32] See Matthew N. Lyons, *Insurgent Supremacists: The U.S. Far Right's Challenge to State and Empire* (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2018).
[33] Dean, "Politics without Politics," 82.