

Jacques Rancière

Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics.

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Jacques Rancière's work has drawn increasing attention recently among Anglophone intellectuals, particularly those of the left. His general outlook can be characterized as that of a radical egalitarian democratic theorist, formed in a French Marxist crucible—his first work was a contribution to Louis Althusser's *Lire le Capital* in the mid-sixties—but developed by empirical historical studies of 19th century working-class cultural aspirations (*Nights of Labour*) and, in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, of a 19th century educational theory developed by Louis-Joseph Jacotot and founded on the assumption of equality of intelligence. Rancière's recent writing focuses mainly on politics and the arts, and translations of recent work on both subjects, from the late 1990s to the middle of this decade, make up the contents of this book.

While some philosophers seek out conceptual, evidential and argumentative flaws in grand speculations, and others propose and defend important theories (one thinks of Rawls in this connection), it falls to certain thinkers to provoke serious rethinking of a topic. Rancière certainly has this effect, at least for Anglophone philosophers, on the central topics within politics. At the same time he is something of a classicist on the subject, drawing his starting point from a distinctive understanding of Aristotle on what constitutes a citizen in the *polis*. As he reads Aristotle, what makes the political citizen is the capacity to rule and be ruled in turn (29). This condition, and nothing else, makes the citizen, and it is universal in a way that eludes any, even broadly accepted, assignment of role, right or responsibility to members of a community. Accepted assignments of status and position constitute a social consensus. Citizenship appears in *dissensus* (the eponymous topic of the book), the dispute of such an assignment by those who have been in some way excluded by it, and who base their claim on some factor other than those already used to assign status. Politics is the contestation of prior assignments, and is practiced by those who act 'litigiously' to advance their claims. This contestation frames a new *we*, a new subject of manifestation, where there had only been unperceived anonymity (141-2).

Since political acts are open to any person whose concerns have been neglected by previous acts of rule, they are fundamentally democratic. As claims (involving some *logos*) and not merely utterances of suffering (mere exercise of the capacity to express pain, simple *phonē*), they have the effect of shifting the way in which the social is perceived. The effective political act produces the ability to see the incompleteness of a system of consensus. It stands in contrast to the 'distribution of the sensible' that

Rancière associates with what he calls the ‘police,’ a consensus frame of mind whose motto might be, ‘Move along, there is nothing to see here’ (37). The political insists that there is indeed something to see, a new subject in the political process. The political refigures what is common, and in doing so destabilizes institutions. Democracy as Rancière understands it (and as he points out in criticizing the so-called ‘democratizing mission’ undertaken by the Bush administration) is the power of the people that no legitimate institution entitles them to exercise, a power ‘that at once legitimizes and delegitimizes [*sic*] every set of institutions, or the power of any one set of people’ (53). True democracy—and its companion, true communism—are not embodied in institutions, even when people’s political actions give rise to institutions. In fact the various institutionalizations have been inadequate to the aims of these actions, which are fundamentally *intempestive*, both belonging to and not belonging to a time. Democracy and communism have no reality apart from the thinking and acting of those committed to the unconditional equality of anybody and everybody (82).

At this stage a commentator might suggest that the political act of the citizen is an act that demands recognition—the perception of a new subject—and engagement and ultimately a response. Litigation is a dispute that demands resolution, and that cannot happen until there is consensus, a new shared understanding of what is common. This is nothing but the return of what Rancière calls the ‘social’. Programs do arise from democratic action, but they are limited and prone to being co-opted. As Rancière remarks about any program to build an inclusive community, if it did exist and was a good one, capitalists would buy it and exploit it as they saw fit (83). However, programs are no more his concern than are states of consensus. It is the process that both produces, and then challenges, various programs and various forms of the social that concerns him.

It is not surprising that a writer who focuses his political thinking on the perception-altering acts of active bodies of citizens has something to say about aesthetic experience and the arts. Rancière has given much attention to this recently, and writings in the second part of the book (‘The Politics of Aesthetics’) are devoted to the subject. As a page of Aristotle is the starting point of considerations about the political, so a page (or several) from Schiller (and related pages from his contemporaries) are the starting point of these reflections on art. Schiller, says Rancière, saw play as the only completely human act, and held that it was the foundation both of the ‘art of the beautiful’ and the art of living (115). He associates this play with a type of life for both individuals and communities, namely the aesthetic life. This is an autonomous regime of experience, which yet must have an element of heterogeneity, the object of that experience. That object may be a work of art, but it is not as art that it is experienced: its origin must be hidden in some way. It is a ‘free appearance’ (117) that the perceiver encounters freely, with the effect of altering the sensorium, opening up new possibilities for perception.

Whatever the object, and whatever its purpose, it presents itself in the aesthetic encounter as a ‘form of life’ (118). This opens the way to the project of art becoming life

by its application to the creation of a fabric of common experience by means ranging from poetry to furniture design. It also opens the way to a project of life becoming art, in which the art object is the always-resistant medium by which common life is expressed. These projects are in tension, and both conflict with the response of some artists and critics to insist on a radical separation of art and life so that the aesthetic experience will find an object that can be experienced as autonomous. Since such an object must be characterized by contrast with what are judged to be inauthentic ones, its autonomy disguises a (for Rancière, double) form of heteronomy.

In Rancière's post-Schillerian and post-Kantian terminology, aesthetics does not deal primarily with the object of a kind of experience, but with the experience it engenders. Thus, the discipline of aesthetics is not primarily a philosophy of art, but an account of that type of experience. The discussion of artistic practice reflects this. Rancière famously distinguishes modes of representation in the arts: the ethical, the representational and the aesthetic. These do not determine distinct epochs: works in more than one mode can coexist. Nevertheless, they present different limitations for the objects offered for aesthetic experience (principles of virtue, vice and propriety in the case of the ethical; essentialism about the relation of form, style and content in the case of the representational).

The most democratic of these, the aesthetic, places the fewest limitations on what may be represented, and on the means by which it may be represented. The aim is to do that which can reframe experience. Its paradigmatic example is *Madame Bovary*. Despite Flaubert's lack of interest in democratic politics, the novel shocked those critics committed to the representational mode because of his choice of a subject and language meant to efface expectations about 'high' and 'low' in literature. In Rancière's view, this was the shock of the democratic even without an associated political program. The aesthetic experience is an experience that is ripe with political possibility because it reconfigures the sensory capacities of those who participate. It is not the act by which citizens constitute themselves as a new collectivity of agents. It is the means by which new possibilities for individuality and new frameworks for the 'impersonal' experience of common objects are opened (141-2). Art that achieves this experiential effect is in one sense 'political', but it has no simple causal relation to political action. For Rancière the relationship between 'interpreting the world' and 'changing it' has been hardened into an enigma by those who first came to challenge the separation between them. One of his purposes is to investigate how the two aims intertwine (167-8).

Thomas Mathien

University of Toronto