

# DISSENSUS

## On Politics and Aesthetics

*Jacques Rancière*

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*Edited and Translated by Steven Corcoran*



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## Editor's Introduction

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What is politics? What is art? And how are we to conceive of their intimate and attested interrelation? There are at least two ways of approaching these questions. First, art and politics, *qua* singular domains of human thought and activity, can be taken as two separate realities, each with its own principle of realization. Politics is so construed, for example, whenever it is defined as a specific form of the exercise of power and its mode of legitimation; so, too, is art, when defined, in modernist or postmodernist terms, on the basis of the ways in which aesthetic specificity has been gradually won by a liberation from the imperatives of mimetic logic.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, the question then arises as to whether these two separate realities can be placed in relation to one another and, if so, under what conditions it ought to happen. Conversely, however, art and politics can be understood, such that their specificity is seen to reside in their contingent suspension of the rules governing normal experience. On this view, their emergence is in no way a necessary outcome of a property that is supposedly inherent to the life of individuals or communities. It depends on an innovative leap from the logic that ordinarily governs human situations. In characterizing politics and aesthetics as forms of *dissensus*, Rancière seeks to defend a version of this latter alternative. His most general thesis is that what these activities do, each in their own way, is to effect a redistribution of the sensible, that is of the ways in which human communities are 'spontaneously' counted as wholes divisible into their constitutive parts and functions. For Rancière, genuine political or artistic activities always involve forms of innovation that tear bodies from their assigned places and free speech and expression from all reduction to functionality. They

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are forms of creation that are irreducible to the spatio-temporal horizons of a given factual community. In other words, the disruption that they effect is not simply a reordering of the relations of power between existing groups; dissensus is not an institutional overturning. It is an activity that cuts across forms of cultural and identity belonging and hierarchies between discourses and genres, working to introduce new subjects and heterogeneous objects into the field of perception. And as both activities, according to Rancière, have to do with reorienting general perceptual space and disrupting forms of belonging, their interrelation is not a question that needs asking. It can be shown that politics has an inherently aesthetic dimension and aesthetics an inherently political one.

Rancière, of course, is not the first to argue that the singularity of these activities lies in their radical challenge to the normal social distribution. What is unique about his theorization, however, is *how* he conceives of this logic of disruption as a process of equality and consequently also the way he is able to analyze the complicated intertwinings of these two forms of exceptionality. If forms of dissensus are irreducible to the objectivity of the situation, it is by virtue of what Rancière refers to as their forms of *egalitarian* suspension of the 'normal' count of the social order. As stated, the nodal point around which both activities revolve, and which ensures their interrelation, is that both are forms of 'dissensus'. First, then, it pays to examine the logic of consensus that every dissensus works to disrupt.

Consensus, as Rancière understands it, is defined by 'the idea of the proper' and the distribution of places of the proper and improper it implies. This logic is, in his view, the spontaneous logic underlying every hierarchy: 'it is the very idea of the difference between the proper and the improper that serves to separate out the political from the social, art from culture, culture from commerce' and that defines hierarchical distributions where everyone's speech is determined in terms of their proper place and their activity in terms of its proper function, without remainder. It consists in the matching of a *poesis* or way of doing, with an *aisthesis*, or horizon of affects. The essence of consensus, then, is the supposition of an identity between sense and sense, between a fact and its interpretation, between speech and its account, between a factual status and an assignation of rights, etc.

By contrast, the logic of dissensus consists in the demonstration of a certain *impropriety* which disrupts the identity and reveals the gap between *poesis* and *aisthesis*. The logic underlying these practices is a materialist and anti-essentialist one. Politics is a process, claims Rancière,



that simultaneously denies every foundation on which it might come to form the positivity of a sphere or a purity. As we shall see throughout the essays in this book, the basic logic of this form of innovation against the dictates of hierarchy and the policing of domains is a paradoxical one, which can be simply stated as: *A* always consists in blurring the boundaries between *A* and *non-A*. Politics, then, instead of consisting in an activity whose principle separates its domain out from the social, is an activity that consists only in blurring the boundaries between what is considered political and what is considered proper to the domain of social or private life. (As we shall see, the same logic is used to make sense of the singularity of art.) But we are a far cry here from the motto according to which everything is political, including aesthetic self-fashioning. Precisely, if everything is political, then nothing is. Similarly the concept of 'the politics of art' is not another version of 'engaged' or 'critical' art any more than it is of 'art for art's sake'. As Rancière never tires of reiterating, art and politics only ever consist in the *effects* of equality that they stage, in the plots which these specific practices of blurring entail. And the unique nature of these effects, which are irreducible to the normal cause and effect relations that govern ordinary experience, means that politics and art cannot harbour within them the integrally realizable principle of new social order (by the same token, however, nor do they exist totally apart from it in their own resplendent brilliance, which, as he points out, always amounts to basing these activities on the very distinctions that they effectively call into question). There is thus a fine line between Rancière's conception of art and politics and any straightforward identification of this practice of blurring with ideas of 'art becoming life' or 'everything is political'. Since to reduce them thus, to want to make politics and art disappear as singular processes, is to miss the singular effects that they bring about and to return them to the logic of consensus. Art can never become life except by being turned into the instrument of those who want to mould a new social ethos; and implementing 'emancipation' will always overturn into a form of societal management by 'enlightened' experts. The ground can then only ever be ripe for forms of disappointment that interpret the dream of emancipation as the root cause of the injustices perpetrated by those same experts. Rancière's work has, I believe, enabled us to see more clearly than ever that nothing is more favourable to the established powers than the 'loss' of the thought and practice of emancipation.

What is further unique about Rancière's philosophical enterprise is the way that he attempts to introduce the egalitarian effects of political and

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artistic action into the core of theory itself. Indeed, philosophy for Rancière might similarly be construed as a contingent and no less creative practice that works, at a higher level of condensation, to level out discursive hierarchies by effecting an *egalitarian* disruption of the prevailing categories governing perception and action. As a result, for all his insistence on blurring boundaries, Rancière's own practice of theorizing ought to be distinguished from the sorts of interdisciplinarity and theoretical devaluation of universality often associated with so-called postmodern theory. The singular instances of equality in politics and art provide Rancière with normative points from which to critique present-day understandings of politics and art. As the present collection reflects, Rancière's theoretical apparatus itself is nothing if not geared to intervening in the present. Written between 1996 and 2004, the texts included comprise some of his most stimulating and provocative essays, touching on diverse political, aesthetic and philosophical questions of our times – from the status of theory and questions of progress and modernity to the demise of egalitarian politics and the shrinking political space, from the overturning of the emancipatory promise of aesthetic experience into artistic practices of restoring the social bond and testifying to an immemorial alienation, not to mention the consensus on the necessity of the world capitalist economy and the state focus on security. In so doing, he engages with a diverse array of thinkers from Hannah Arendt to Giorgio Agamben, including Jacques Derrida, Antonio Negri, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Alain Badiou, among others. These essays contain ideas and concepts that have often already been treated in detail in book-length works.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, they reveal new aspects of these ideas and concepts, as Rancière's takes his fight to different fronts or moves to new landscapes that throw up new paths or obstacles, and oblige a reframing of the plots that he proposes for mapping our political and artistic present.

### THE AESTHETICS OF POLITICS

The present-day circumscription of political activity, we know, is everywhere permeated and suffocated by the notion of consensus. By restoring the radical dimension of political appearing and its effects of equality, Rancière's concept of the aesthetics of politics provides one of the best contemporary antidotes to this most fashionable of ideological notions.

In this vein, then, I'll say a few introductory words about Rancière's conception of politics and his critique of the 'police' notion of consensus.

Let us begin with the expression 'consensus democracy'. It is a notion, as Rancière implacably demonstrates, that means far more than the advocacy of discussion and preference for social and political peace to which one seeks to reduce it. What it essentially states is that the experience of the social order is a common and non-litigious one. A consensual vision of politics always involves an attempt to define the preconditions that determine political choice as objective and univocal. Such an experience can take many forms: it can be 'grounded' in the ancient order of the divisions of society, or it can take on its current shape as the idea that political action is circumscribed by a series of flows of wealth, populations, opinions and geo-strategic forces. Needless to say, the logic of consensus is a major feature of the contemporary managerial state. In its current form, the consensual vision of politics involves two basic operations: a first operation that reduces the people as political subject to the population, that is to a sociological category decomposable into its constituent empirical categories; and second, the transformation of politics into the affair of professional politicians and their experts in government whose arrogated function is to arbitrate the residual and marginal possibilities that the objectivity of the situation permits. Today's worker, precisely, is not a political subject struggling for equality; he/she is a worker who has rights only insofar as these rights accord with the factual status of the function performed, rights which must be continually eaten away at to 'ensure' job protection, that is, so long as the objectivity of the situation permits it – those who then fall outside of the preserve of worker identity (the unemployed, 'illegal' immigrants, etc.) are no longer excluded; they are simply drop outs.

Construed as an equalitarian challenge to the normal social distribution, however, politics is precisely an activity that overturns every such reduction of the people to the population and of politics to an affair of government. While, as stated, every hierarchical order ultimately rests on a logic of the 'proper' that works to separate out different domains, and to allocate different shares to groups based on the supposed propriety of their place and function of their activity, dissensus is based on a logic of equality that reveals the arbitrariness of that distribution for political participation and artistic practice.

Examples of politics in Rancière's sense stretch from the invention of the *demos* in Ancient Greece to the East German crowds crying '*We are the*

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*people'* against their statist incorporation. The feature that binds all the diverse historical instances of politics, is that it concerns a particular kind of speech situation. It consists in the often short-lived moment when those who are excluded from the political order or included in it in a subordinate way, stand up and speak for themselves. This speech situation is always a litigious one insofar as it is maintained that, contrary to the justifications for maintaining hierarchical order, no reasons exist that can justify excluding anyone from the order of speech. It is litigious insofar as it disputes as baseless the extension of the predicates that defines the politicity of some and relegates others to the obscurity of the merely given. It is litigious insofar as it refutes the forms of identification and belonging that work to maintain the status quo and, through a violently poetic displacement of the prevailing relations of speech, introduces a supplementary speech that is irreducible to the constraints of social place. This is precisely what nineteenth-century workers and women did through a process of extra-institutional litigation. They enacted the rights that they were guaranteed by the constitution but were denied by the constraints of the order. As Rancière puts it, through the fact of their speech they showed that they had the rights that they had not, and did not have the rights that they had. Though such claims will not always be seen or heard, politics is effective whenever it does manage to bring about a global change in the perception of social space through this play of litigation. Politics for Rancière is always aesthetic in this basic sense. If he insists on the aesthetic dimension of politics, then, this insistence is to be rigorously distinguished from notions involving the application of criteria of beauty to forms of authoritarian power that Walter Benjamin aimed at under the concept of the aestheticization of politics.

The logic that this politics of egalitarian litigation entails is a paradoxical logic of the 'singular universal'. Against the particular power-interests of the ruling elite and forms of privatization of speech, political speech, as Žižek puts it, 'involves a local instance that acts as a stand-in for the universal: it consists in a conflict between the structured social body where each part has its place and the "part with no part" which unsettles this order on account of the empty principle of universality – the principled equality of all *qua* speaking beings'. On this basis Rancière is also able to show that the specific kind of conflict entailed in political dissensus has nothing to do with the forms of struggle associated with the supposed divide between friend and enemy. Rancierian political dissensus is not a

revival of the dubious Schmittian notion that politics has to do with making a decision on the enemy. Politics, for Rancière, effects a *break* with the sensory selfevidence of the 'natural' order that destines specific groups and individuals to rule, to public or private life, and that delineates between friend and enemy, by pinning bodies down to a certain time and space, that is by pinning individuals to specific bodies. It invents ways of being, seeing and saying, engenders new subjects, new forms of collective enunciation. And as the principle of this innovative break is the paradoxical presupposition of equality, it is simultaneously an activity in which *all* can partake, irrespective of the characteristics defining one's being *in* the situation in question.

Against the consensual positing of a common and non-litigious experience, the supplement of politics demonstrates, precisely, that *the social*, in this sense, is *not*. It introduces a supplement into the social order that severs the objectivity of the situation from its account, that forces the withdrawal of every idea that those who rule have a disposition or title to do so. In other words, the egalitarian effects of politics, showing that the uncounted also partake of political speech, rebounds on the order of earned titles and supposed dispositions that aim at stitching up social space. It shows that the fact of ruling is not underpinned by an order of reasons. What underpins the rule of some is only that fact *that* they rule, beneath which there is nothing but the title of the equality of speech – and thus of the capacity for politics – which is in itself belongs to all and no one in particular. The dissensus by which the invisible equality subtending social distinction is made visible, and the inaudible speech of those rejected into the obscure night of silence audible, thereby enacts a different *sharing* of the sensible.

Further, as Rancière sees it, the political staging of equality also always severs the fact of the social order from the theoretical accounts given of that order. In showing that there is no order of reasons underpinning the social order of domination, it disrupts the gesture of complicity between theory and the oligarchic social order – the elitist gesture whereby the privilege of thought is reserved to the few and the vast majority are banished to shadowy silence or inchoate noise. This rupture is one whose consequences Rancière has always strived to incorporate into theoretical practice (we will come to this point again below). As such, his practice of thinking has pitted him against two mains fronts: the first, of which the famous Marxist theorist Louis Althusser is a prime example, sets it against all scientific attempts to know the truth of the masses.<sup>3</sup> In Althusserian

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terms, this was articulated in the well-known distinction between scientific endeavour and ideological mystification. In contrast to the language of the masses, ideologically mystified by virtue of their (inferior) place in the social order, the science of the intellectual is that which enables him/her to discern the true condition of the masses. This frame of analysis, forged by one of Marxism's most radical theoreticians, was itself to be overturned in the unprecedented union of intellectual contestation and worker's struggles that comprised May 1968. The shop-floor demands for workers' control, for example, escaped the existing forms for representation, which were geared towards negotiation at the top, between party and union structures. Not only were such claims structurally excluded from existing structures of 'communication', but they showed that, contrary to the Althusserian scientific Marxist, the masses do not need to be told about the reasons for their domination – there are no reasons apart from domination, and what is rather at stake is the belief in being able to change that order. For many of those who, like Rancière, were active in May 1968, what appeared with striking clarity is that political reason is not something that occurs behind the backs of the masses; instead, the movements of politics need to be conceived on the basis of the effects of their own words and actions. Political thought is not that which is performed in transcendent fashion by the intellectual who reads culture for its signs of truth, but as that which is produced immanently by the collective of those engaged in political action.

If May 1968 disrupted the rigid stratification of the order of speech and put paid to theoretical elitism, then this is because it showed that the working class which this theory had appropriated for itself, and the subsequent elaboration of its theoretical task, was more about shoring up a place for theory itself.

The second major front of Rancière's strategy concerns the more pragmatic, liberal attempts to delineate the performative speech conditions for politics. The Habermasian schema, for example, supposes that there exist *a priori* pragmatic constraints that determine that the very logic of argumentative exchange. It supposes that interlocutors are obliged to engage in a relation of mutual comprehension, failing which they enter into a performative contradiction and lose their self-coherence. Now this logic presupposes precisely that the existence of the interlocutors is pre-established. Against Habermas, however, Rancière emphasizes the fact that genuine political speech above all entails a dispute over the very

quality of those who speak. Rancière's argument in fact undermines all attempts to deduce a form of political rationality from a supposed essence of language or activity of communication. Political struggle proper is therefore not a matter of rational debate between multiple interests; it is above all, a struggle to have one's voice heard and oneself recognized as a legitimate partner in debate. Conversely, the most elementary gesture of depoliticization is always to disqualify the political quality of the speech of those who argue demonstrate their equality.

Rancière's unique style of political critique is based in what he sees as the fundamental oscillation between the privatization of speech in structures of power and its dis-incorporation through the activities of political subjects. Underpinning this oscillation, in Rancière's view, is the fundamental presupposition of the equality of intelligences. Equality here is not an essence, a value, or a goal. It is a presupposition of theory and practice, but it has no inherent content, nor specific grammar of its own. Indeed, it supports practices of equality only insofar as it is the disavowed presupposition for the proper functioning of power itself. It is the latent potential involved in taking the effects of this presupposition as far as possible which forms the condition of possibility of politics. In other words, if it is possible for a political supplement to emerge that disrupts the social order based on nothing but the presupposition of equality, this is because the inegalitarian order itself always already presupposes the equality of individuals as speaking beings in its functioning.<sup>4</sup> The political re-enactment of equality can only emerge because of the inevitable contradictions of a social order which presupposes equality but simultaneously disavows it.

The presupposition of equality, then, is an empty presupposition or void in the sense that, while in every order only some are counted as being equals among equals, and as capable of social distinction, the others from whom they are supposedly distinct, are always already included in that equality, precisely because no social or biological trait ever excludes them from enacting it. Moreover, if Rancière continually emphasizes the chance-like nature of politics against all the attempts to explain political events by referring to underlying causes, it is because *nothing* explains why people decide to rise up and demonstrate their equality with those who rule. Equality, that is, is only ever the preserve of those who decide to *include themselves out*. Which is to say that every political moment involves the incalculable leap of those who decide to

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demonstrate their equality and organize their refusal against the injustices that promote the status quo.

The first essay of this collection, 'Ten theses on Politics', simultaneously comprises Rancière's most succinct text on this logic of politics and the aesthetics it implies and a pointed intervention into present-day *doxa* about the nature of politics. His strident formulations distinguish him both from 'liberal' claims, made after the demise of the Soviet Union, about the 'return of politics', as well as from melancholic claims of the 'end of politics' *qua* emancipatory project – that is, in both cases, from claims that ultimately work to make a radical distinction between the social and politics, which, localized in the state, ultimately gets reduced to the struggle for and maintaining of power.

The remaining essays of this section, starting with his eulogy to Jacques Derrida, 'Does Democracy Mean Something?', illustrate various aspects of the 'Ten Theses'. Like Rancière, Derrida set forth an alternate idea of democracy – his much-discussed *democracy-to-come* – to the hegemonic attempts of the new 1990s world order to institutionalize it or usurp its name. Where Rancière does so by emphasizing political subjectivation, however, Derrida tries to open up this gap through the category of the Other. He thus ends up tying emancipation not to the activity of a subject enacting the egalitarian trait *here and now*, i.e. to political *activity*, but to an ethical attitude of infinite respect for otherness. Rancière argues that this exemplary *substantialization* of the other, which shifts the emphasis decisively from political *demonstration* – which inscribes a *multiplicity* of forms of otherness in supplement to the body of the community – to a transcendental horizon that never arrives, is a hallmark of the contemporary ethical trend. What is more, caught in the necessity of having thus to avoid all pre-emptive identifications of a particular event or other with the Other as such, Derrida ultimately dismisses political speech and its verification of cases of universality, diverting it for the benefit of a theory that must continuously deconstruct the occurrence of any actual other.

The next essay, 'Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?' looks more closely at the operative categories of political subjectivation in the modern age of human rights. The question of who, man or the citizen, is the subject of human rights, was revived again after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. Against the background of the triumphalism of liberal democracy, the exception to the consensus appeared in the form of xenophobic and nationalist movements, since, notwithstanding



the repulsive ideas they espouse and acts they sanction, they alone seemed to insist on the need for collective action on major national and international issues – this is their point of strength. Despite its apparent heterogeneity to the system of consensus, however, this appearance is in fact part and parcel of it, a phenomenon that the system denounces but is simultaneously complicit in producing.

Rancière locates this development against the background of the demise of political dissensus – or leftist forms of political consciousness – that has taken place over the last thirty years. While the paradoxical relationship of partaking has always taken place in the interval *between* man and citizen, the demise of the selfevidence of political litigation has made it possible for the interval of the political subject to turn into an interval between two distinct groups – citizens who possess rights by virtue of belonging to a state, on the one hand, and the masses of rightless ‘men’ who simply fall outside of the happy circle of state and right, on the other.

It is similarly against this background that it pays to locate Agamben’s thesis according to which the camp is the *nomos* of modernity in which the exception tends to become the rule. What Agamben fails to take into account is the rarity of political subjectivation, the way in which it appears and vanishes. This doing, he tends to analyse the conjunction, in the 1990s, of strengthening liberal discourse and the rise of xenophobic and racist phenomena as the historical result of an underlying ontological process, rather as having been facilitated by a weakening of politics proper. And that he does so in taking Arendt’s depoliticising archipolitical distinction between politics and the social as a starting point is significant. Rancière shows that the effort is doomed from the outset, that it is not possible to escape the rigid distinction between the political and the social (Arendt) merely by articulating the two sides of the binary to reveal their zone of indiscernability (Agamben). The upshot can itself only be depoliticizing: on Agamben’s view the ‘rightless’ of the Nazi camps and of the deportation zones of our liberal democracies alike, to mention only those, are simply poor unfortunates caught in a state of exception ‘beyond oppression’, which is to say beyond any account in terms of democracy or anti-democracy, justice or injustice. They are simply part of an undifferentiated, global ontological situation from which only a God could save us. Against Agamben, Rancière insists on the possibility and therefore the necessity of accounting for these situations in such terms.

Along with Agamben’s ontologizing of the exception, another key operator of what Rancière calls the ethical turn of politics is the radicalization

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of political wrong, whose effect on the narrative of emancipation is plainer still. Whether stated in the language of George Bush or the philosophical enterprise of a Lyotard, the overall result is the same: the multiplicity of litigious arguments that aim to overcome injustice by demonstrating the part of those with no part is swept aside; and injustice starts to appear as an absolute and irremediable evil against which the politician will undertake a mission of 'infinite justice' and the philosopher exhort us to the infinite duty of resisting the inhuman, which is nothing other than the interminably prescribed duty of bearing witness to our *dependence* on the Other. The narrative of the philosopher, far from the end of Grand Narratives, consists in a new form of narrative that permits the philosopher to account *ad infinitum* for the essential reason for every historical wrong. It aims to dispense with the multiplicity of ways that political subjects open gaps in the fabric of the visible and the sayable in favour of an overarching ethical discourse that denounces every attempt at emancipation in advance. An affirmative exception to this triumphant chorus of liberal democracy and sombre accounts of our destiny are the attempts to rethink the actuality of communism for the present conjuncture. However, Rancière singles out the revivals of the Marxian conception of communism, notably in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, with their influential concept of the multitudes and phenomenological description of the antiglobalization movements. In 'Communism: From Actuality to Inactuality', Rancière questions the validity of the presupposition on which the traditional idea of communism's actuality is based. His claim is that it involves a form of the ontologization of equality from which viewpoint anything short of the full implementation of the collective intelligence is ultimately dismissed as mere appearance. This idea of the actuality of communism and political subjectivity wants to open up room for a new political voice, but does so only by proffering a new form of consensus – the coming of the true community. In short, the striking novelty of Rancière's position on communism, which many orthodox Marxists will no doubt find unacceptable, is that to think the manifestation of political equality there is no need to ontologize it as a supposed collective power of production that is *always already* at work in the forms of capitalist domination and apt to explode them. His arresting reversal states, quite to the contrary, that such manifestations of equality always occur *afterwards*, as attempts to expand the domain of universality, to reconfigure its objects and re-populate its subjects. Failing to do so, he

argues risks confusing the veritable forms of political emancipation with the capitalist forms that they interrupt.

The next two chapters are interviews conducted by the Deleuzian journal *Multitudes*. Both touch on rival attempts to conceive the basic tendencies and lines of flight of the current world order. The first deals again with the above-mentioned attempt by Hardt and Negri to conceptualize the world order and the anti-globalization movements, and bears specifically on the differences between Rancière's notion of the people and the concept of the multitudes as ways of dealing with these phenomena. The second deals with current uses of the notion of biopolitics as a way of theorizing radical political and artistic practices and its implications for conceptualizing political subjectivity. Rancière shows that the ontological distinctions claimed by the concepts of biopolitics and the multitudes, insofar as they comprise ideas of political subjectivation, end up dismissing dissensus by dissolving its multiple instances in the law of a global situation. This occurs either in metapolitical fashion by switching scenes, that is by referring the multiple stagings of political dissensus back to the unique scene of Empire vs the multitudes, or, again, in archi-political fashion, by dissolving it in the relation between sovereignty and bare life.

The last essays of this section turn towards specific occurrences of geopolitical significance. The first, 'September 11 and Afterwards: A Rupture in the Symbolic Order?', examines the overwhelmingly consensual reaction to the September 11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. After the attacks all kinds of stupidities were uttered: from naïve arguments about the destruction of symbols of power and the desire for world hegemony, to proclamations about the effraction of a non-symbolizable real in American symbolizations of togetherness, to notions that the representatives of the other world, that of traditional symbolic order, had returned with violent force as if to remind us of the price to pay for our western follies, which imagine that traditional relationships can be simply overturned at will. Rancière's analysis here is right on target: there was no rupture, no dissensus. Indeed, not only did the US government have the words on hand to capture the events, but they did so in perfect identity with the principle of their attackers: that of the everlasting fight against good and evil. If September 11 did tell us something about the world we live in, it was not due to any alteration of the relations between the symbolic and the real – categories whose pertinence for understanding such events Rancière puts into question. Instead, the rupture to which

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this event testifies had already taken place with the shift from democratic dissensus to the consensual, ethical turn of politics. In other words, what happened on September 11 is that it revealed the utter weakness of the left, which completely missed a chance to formulate a political alternative to the ethical discourse of the war on terror.

In the next essay on 'War as the Supreme Form of Advanced Plutocratic Consensus', Rancière links together the neo-liberal promotion of the freedom of the commodity to a shift in the form of state consensus from one involving arbitration to one that focuses increasingly on practices of security, that is he links shifts in the economy to shifts in forms of governance. But what are we to make of this interrelation? Usual descriptions of this interrelation – as the global government of capital, triumphant mass democracy or soft totalitarianism – posit that contemporary modes of governance are attributable to changes in the global economy. The modernity of one prescribes the modernity of the other. However, an analysis of the Iraq war, with its strange mixture of sophisticated technological weaponry and religiosity, of the new and the old, quickly countermands such descriptions. What lies 'behind' the recourse to the 'archaic' forms of propaganda used to justify the Iraq war is a form of consensus that eschews traditional state functions of the re-distribution of wealth and the construction of forms of social solidarity in favour of a symbolization of the collective as a people united by common values and under attack from 'inexplicable' evil. To denounce this as mere ideology working to cover over the stain of economic interests is to miss a crucial point. No doubt the manipulation of the frightened collective of 'citizens' huddled around the consensual warrior state always been the best form of collective for a state based essentially on promoting the unbridled reign of the commodity. But the particularity of this example of the military export of 'liberal democracy' resides, precisely, in the autonomy of its principle with respect to all explanations in terms of economics or technology. This principle, Rancière argues, is that of *insecurity*. The most advanced form of the contemporary consensual state is that which requires the generation of new situations of insecurity to enforce its governance.

## THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS

In the face of such oligarchic domination, art's power of transformative and creative action will also surely be key to altering the realm of the possible.

At a first level, then, we can see that Rancière's conceptualization of art and politics as forms of dissensual activity aims precisely to capture the common nature of their innovative potential to disrupt forms of domination. Indeed, since its emergence as a domain of singular experience around the time of the French Revolution, separate from the strictures of tradition and the unimpeded dictates of oligarchy, art has always been connected to the promise of new world of art and a new life for individuals and the community. What Rancière in fact shows is that the freedom of the aesthetic – as separate sphere of experience or appearance – is based upon the same principle of equality that is enacted in political demonstration. This is key to his concept of the politics of aesthetics. But what does it mean to talk about equality vis-à-vis artistic practice and aesthetic experience?

To understand this, it pays to recall that Rancière distinguishes between three regimes of art – only the third of which is, properly speaking, to be associated with the kind of innovation activity referred to above. In the first, the ethical regime, works of art have no autonomy. They are viewed as images to be questioned for their truth and for their effect on the ethos of individuals and the community. Rancière's standard reference for this regime is Plato's *Republic*. In the second, the representative regime, works of art belong to the sphere of imitation, and so are no longer subject to the laws of truth or the common rules of utility. They are not so much copies of reality as ways of imposing a form on matter. As such, they are subject to a set of intrinsic norms: a hierarchy of genres, adequation between expression and subject matter, correspondences between the arts, etc. The third, the aesthetic regime, overthrows this normativity and the relationship between form and matter on which it is based. Here art comes to be defined as such, in its singularity, as belonging to a specific sensorium that forms an exception to the normal regime of the sensible.

In the representative regime, Rancière argues, the centrality of action justified the primacy of speech over the image, while the parallel between social and aesthetic oligarchy was rendered in a series of rigid separations between art forms. Despite these strict, hierarchical separations, art forms were commensurable insofar as they all depicted actions: knowing whether a given form of virtuosity was an art could be answered by the question of whether it 'told a story'. Every artwork had to have a narrative with a moral, social and political significance. It relied on a system of meaning, centred on the primary of action, wherein meaning was a relation from one will to another. 'The fine arts were so named because the law of *mimesis* defined them as a regulated relation between a way of doing – a *poiesis* –

and a way of being which is affected by it – an *aisthesis*'. The pleasure afforded by this threefold relation contained in the artwork was the guarantee of 'human nature'. But this nature was always split, since the representative system was also one in which the *fine arts* distinguished people of refined sensibility as opposed to the coarseness of the masses. With the aesthetic regime this knot between *poiesis* and *aisthesis* is undone, and humanity is lost. But the loss brings with it a promise of a new form of individual and community life. At the same time, art now addresses itself, at least in principle, to the gaze of anyone at all, can be used by anyone to intervene in whatever situation. Art in the aesthetic regime finds its only content precisely in this process of undoing, in opening up a gap between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*, between a way of doing and a horizon of affect.

While this is a feature common to both art and politics, the rupture is performed differently in each case. The difference is in no way an ontological one, but instead resides in the different principles according to which this severing is operated. While politics involves the open-ended set of practices driven by the assumption of equality between any and every speaking being and by the concern to test this equality – that is, the staging of a 'we' that separates the community from itself – aesthetic productions tend to define a field of subjective anonymity as a result of introducing the egalitarian axiom into the modes of representation themselves.

The significance of the aesthetic regime and the politics it implies emerges clearly in contrast to the strictures of the representative regime. Each of their sets of principles contrast directly with one another. The primacy of action in the representative regime is opposed by the new primacy of *expressiveness* in the aesthetic. This expressiveness means that language or images of the world are now used as poetic powers and ends in themselves, beyond any mimetic function. The hierarchy of genres is deposed insofar as the aesthetic regime asserts the *equality of all subjects* – the once scandalous fact that ordinary things, let alone the lowly people, can comprise the main subjects of a book. This, in turn, implies a third principle: beyond the equality of subjects, is the *principle of indifference*. The imperative of propriety, of representing specific subjects in the appropriate fashion, is undone by the aesthetic regime's insistence on the indifference of style in relation to represented subject. Paradigmatic for Rancière here is Flaubert, who achieved an absolutization of style relative to the subject, or rather, by presenting all things with the same care, made style into the only true subject of literature.

Now, the uniqueness of Rancière's conceptualization of art's specificity, as it emerges in the aesthetic regime, is that it finds its generative dynamic in the constitutive and irresolvable contradictions between these principles. The first such contradiction is that between total expressiveness and the principle of indifference. While the first establishes a substantial link between the immanent poeticity of the world and the artistic work – the poem is the expression, at a higher power of concentration, of the meaning that is already that of the world itself – the second rejects the substantial link and denies that expression should be privileged in any kind of necessary way (social or aesthetic) for any given topic. The second emerges as an attempt to deal with this first contradiction. Trying to produce an identity between the radical subjective freedom of the artist and the objective necessity of the world expressed in the work, Romanticism fails to close the gap and is compelled to testify to the irreducible gap between the sensible and the intelligible, between things and words. The deeper contradiction, then, is that between the principle of expressiveness ('everything speaks') and the 'principle of literariness'. This latter principle is the ultimate consequence of the demise of the representative regime, which placed constraints on language and image use through the rules of mimesis and tied the propriety of representation to the norms attached to social hierarchy. The principle of literariness refers to the freeing of language and representation, such that that everyone and anyone is now entitled to intervene in any form of discourse, use or be addressed by any language and be the subject of representation. It refers to the availability of the anonymous letter in a regime of unlimited representability. With the destruction of the logic of the representative regime, not only are the social separations between individuals undermined, ontological disorder also ensues: all constraints are removed concerning the very *choice of objects*. Ultimately, the idea of silent speech goes further, then: it points, beyond the expressiveness of the silent thing, to the very impossibility of tying speech *as such* to fixed ontological distinctions between the ideal and the real, the political and the social, art and non-art, words and things.

In the new regime, the field of experience, severed from its traditional references points, is therefore open for new restructurings through the 'free play' of aestheticization. Since no pre-ordered, pre-given structures are available anymore that would define what can be said, in what form, in which language, using which images, and to whom, art in the 'aesthetic regime' consists of always limited attempts or propositions for

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a local restructuring of the field of experience. Aestheticized art thus does not always exist, but is only 'ever the set of relations that are traced here and now through singular and precarious acts'.

In the first essay of this section, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes', Rancière explores the various plots that have framed the attempts at restructuring individual and collective life in the modern era. Rancière's description of what he calls the aesthetic revolution separates him both from endeavours to give an account of artistic purity that would sever it from all compromise with politics or commodity aestheticization, as well as from those that would like to see the political promises of the aesthetic fulfilled. His position eschews the basis either for the pure autonomy or the sheer heteronomy of art with respect to politics or life. Rancière's aesthetic theory undermines all the sociological attempts to refer the indifference of aesthetic judgement to the realities of class struggle, just as it presents an alternative to all the modernist and postmodernist theories that define the different art forms in terms of their self-liberation from the imperatives of mimetic logic. Whether one considers Flaubert's posture of art for art's sake, Mallarmé's concern with finding the essential language of poetry, Adorno's insistence of the self-containedness of the artwork, or Lyotard's assigning the avant-garde the task of isolating art from cultural demand in the experience of the sublime, all simultaneously link their respective notions of autonomy with a conception of heteronomy.

The paradoxical basis for all these positions is given in Rancière's original reading of Schiller's famous claim that the aesthetic 'will bear the edifice of the art of the beautiful *and* of the art of living'. As Rancière puts it 'The entire question of the "politics of aesthetics" turns on this short conjunction. The aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that *and*. It grounds the autonomy of art to the extent that it connects it to the hope of "changing life"'. The productively ambiguous formula of this politics is: 'art is an autonomous form *of* life'. In this essay, the reader will admire the deft footwork with which Rancière is able to navigate the twists and turns this formula takes in multiple artistic projects and aesthetic theories, from Flaubert through the Soviet Constructivists and today's relational art, from Schiller through Adorno and Lyotard. Each of these positions articulates a specific solution to the relation between autonomy and heteronomy, and each solution in turn generates its own entropy, which, in turn, gives rise to new strategies for reframing the divisions of the forms of our experience. Each reading of this paradox of art in the aesthetic regime – that art is art to the extent that it is not



art – has its own ‘metapolitics’, its own way of ‘proposing to politics rearrangements of its space, of reconfiguring art as a political issue, or of asserting itself as true politics’. Key to this essay is the way that Rancière goes against the trend current trend: instead of arguing for a ‘radical’ aesthetics of the sublime over and against an ‘ideological’ aesthetics of the beautiful, he overturns things: the aesthetics of the sublime itself actually seems to presuppose the Schillerian aesthetic promise, of which it is an inverted form.

If art consists in attempts to disturb the boundary between art and non-art, the next essay, ‘The Paradoxes of Political Art’, deals precisely with current, diverse artistic attempts to disturb this boundary. The air is thick today with claims that, after a time spent in the postmodern wilderness, art has ‘returned to politics’. Rancière inquires into what the statement about art’s return to politics give us to understand about how art is conceived, its efficacy, and our hopes and judgements regarding the political import of artistic practice. We know that art in the aesthetic regime involves a form of aesthetic experience that suspends the sort of hierarchical relations implied in the ethical and representative regimes. It forgoes ethical immediacy and representational mediation, inducing a *cut* between the intention of the artist and the outcome on the spectator’s behaviour, between cause and effect. Art, precisely, cannot *know or anticipate* the effect that its strategies of subversion may or may not have on the forms of political subjectivation. Art may create a new scenery of the visible and a new dramaturgy of the intelligible, but these innovations work to reframe the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience. And in this way it helps to create the fabric of a common experience in which new modes of constructing common object and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed that are characteristic of the ‘aesthetics of politics’. This politics of aesthetics, however, operates under the conditions prescribed by an original disjunction. It produces effects, but it does so on the basis of an original effect that implies the suspension of any direct cause – effect relationship.<sup>5</sup> However, the various practices that can be subsumed under the statement of art’s return to politics eschew precisely that. These artistic attempts to ‘go against the grain’ – which include projects as diverse as relational art’s attempt to restore the social bond in the face of the atomizing effects of capital and emphasize the sense of taking part in a common world, to those that seek to provide a refuge for political dissensus as a way of counteracting the shrinking of political space – share two things: first, a certain consensual notion of reality, or of the

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'outside' of art, and second an idea of the efficacy of art itself, of its power to produce effects 'outside' itself (mobilize people for political causes, create a sense of our being together etc.). In other words, this 'return to politics' is a far cry from the type of artistic practice that had been torn from the hinges of its specific and specialized realm to keep apace with the speed of events in May 1968. The 'return to politics' does not aim to achieve contemporaneousness with the present, to exhort people to continue to uphold that untimely present and to work through its effects, but instead to set up a place for art as such. The question is therefore not, as Rancière notes, whether art should or not return to politics, but to analyse the shift in artistic practice in line with the shift from dissensus to consensus. What does this latter shift mean for artistic practice today? What does aestheticized art do in times of consensus? The struggle, it turns out, is between two forms of the politics of aesthetics, attestable in current artistic production: one which ascribes the artwork an enigmatic power, a *presence* that has radical effects outside itself, and another that induces an aesthetic *cut* to set up a disconnection between the production of artistic *savoir-faire* and social destination, between sensory forms, the signification that can be read on them and their possible effects.

A similar point structures 'The Politics of Literature'. This syntagm, Rancière maintains, does not refer to the politics held by its author, but instead to the way that literature does politics *as* literature. This politics is a conflict within a specific system of the efficacy of words, between two opposed ways of using words or 'two politics of the "mute letter": that of literariness, on the one hand, of the democratic chattering of the letter, the letter without master to guide it, that speaks too much and to anyone at all; and, on the other, that of the symptomatic reading, the attempt to decipher the mute meaning written on the body of things which does away with the evil of this democratic disorder. Rancière's reading of these two politics of literature reveals the profound malaise affecting all those scientific attempts to tell the 'truth' about literature, since it reduces to zero the analytical value of the supposed distinction between the discourse *on* literature and literature itself. A rigorous understanding of the conflict between the two politics of literature dispels, first, any notion of a truth underlying literature; and, second, it shows that the literary 'politics of the mute letter' provide the conditions of possibility for the scientific discourse on literature itself – *Kulturkritik*, to take one example, is ultimately indiscernible from the objects of its own analysis.

Now, if there is one thing that Deleuze was not, it is a 'critical', 'political' or 'sociological' interpreter of art or literature. He does not develop an epistemology of art, nor like many others does he argue that the contradiction of literature boils down to the old illusion of mistaking the interpretation of life for its transformation. Deleuze's effort in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie* is, argues Rancière, to try to close the gap between art and politics altogether. Instead of a disjunction there is an identity. Deleuze's thesis is that art *is* politics – it is a thesis that Rancière's more democratic and less aristocratic stance on aesthetics and artists must refute if it is to stand. Deleuzians will no doubt protest against the charges of transcendence which Rancière pins to his aesthetic theory, but it will be harder for them to overcome a curious thing, namely, the fact that Lyotard's view of art, while opposed to Deleuze's in its conclusions, is drawn – perhaps more logically – from the same premises.

The final essay in this section thematizes a point that peppers many of the previous essays, namely Rancière's thesis that art and politics today are affected by an ethical turn. The prevailing discourse on ethics is generally seen as a corrective to the excesses of the artistic absolute and disasters of visions of political utopia – a set of norms that submit politics and art to the validity of their principles and the consequences of their practices. The familiar list of categories under which these are supposedly carried out: trauma, terror, radical otherness, consensus, the humanitarian, the unrepresentable, the sublime actually mark quite a contrary tendency: namely, a collapse of the very categories by which normative judgements and the analysis of consequences is carried out. This essay provides one of the most trenchant analyses of the series of changes that, over the last thirty and more years, has affected artistic production and political practice, not to mention theoretical analysis. Rancière discusses a series of plays, films, art exhibitions, political statements and theoretical positions that attest to a gap between two eras. His diagnosis is unequivocal: the postmodern carnival was basically only ever a smokescreen hiding the transformation into ethics and the pure and simple inversion of the promise of emancipation. Devoid of melancholy, however, Rancière also takes equal distance from the latent religiosity of yesterday's modernist concept of the future revolutionary event. Against every idea of the 'event' coupled with the idea of an internal necessity, he asserts the radical contingency, in politics and aesthetics, of *dissensus*.

**THE AESTHETICS OF WRITING**

I will finish with a few remarks about Rancière's own practice of philosophy. Ever since his first work, *La Leçon d'Althusser*, Rancière has set out to develop a practice of writing that avoids radical talk which simply ends up providing the restoration of the Academic order (notably after May 1968) with even more sharper theoretical weapons. Taking cognizance of this failure of theory, particularly noticeable in Althusser, Rancière has strived to develop a style of philosophizing that carries the logic of dissensus that had been so vibrant in the 60s and 70s over into critique. In so doing, he distances himself from two other prevalent modes of critique. First, from a hermeneutics of suspicion which attempts to discern a 'secret' hidden beneath discourse – usually a mark of domination; and second, from the deconstructive model of interminably digging through the strata of metaphorical meaning. Instead of the various forms of denunciation normally associated with critique, and the figures of mastery that underlie the formal game of conceptual distinction as much as its deconstruction, Rancière strives to develop a way of philosophising that might itself be characterized as a dissensual activity.

For Rancière this entails that philosophy, as much as politics or art, also incorporate the paradoxical principle of equality into its operations, that it uphold these instances of discourse and carry their effects of equality or non-mastery over into conceptualization. But this immediately involves that philosophy is displaced with regard to any pre-established site of philosophy. What Rancière aims at, against all attempts to establish a form of rationality that by virtue of its superior method gives us access to the thing itself, is an egalitarian levelling out of discourses. If he occupies the interval between discourses (that of the masses and philosophy, history or literature...), it is to undo all such pretensions and reduce all discourses to a common language. If the master's discourse is wanting, then it is because it relies on exactly the same poetic operations as those discourses it rejects or pretends to subsume.

Corresponding to both the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics, then, is what Rancière calls a 'poetics of knowledge': an operation that shows all discourses to be specifiable, not by forms of self-legitimation based on the supposed specificity of their object, but by poetic operations with which they establish the visibility of objects and make them available to thought. The poetics of knowledge involves

setting all discourses within the horizon of this common language. Philosophy, qua poetics of knowledge, is thus an inventive activity which, itself without any pre-established site, creates a common language and allows for a re-description of a common world of experience, in challenge to apparent disciplinary divides. Guided by this principle of equality, it enables a re-description that maps the tendencies of the times, separating out those that stifle dissensus, even in the guise of providing a house for it, and those that suggest new scenes of political, artistic and theoretical innovation.

So, Rancière's conception of philosophy is not that of an autonomous realm of systems that evolve in time; instead philosophy is an intervention into theory. In this sense, his work is similar to that of Althusser insofar as both understand philosophy as a practice that is polemical and situation-specific. The texts of both authors always address a historical and political context whose stakes they set out to clarify. Contrary to Althusser, however, who always strived to reveal any given conceptual debate as a struggle between idealist tendencies and Marxian materialism, Rancière is always and everywhere out to expose the figures of mastery underlying conceptual debate, of which Marxian materialism itself is merely a sophisticated variant, by exposing the common poetic operation on which they rest. That his writing is thoroughly permeated by a trenchant irony is a reflection of this radical polemical stance; everywhere he corrects our supposed certainties and vaguer notions, unremitting in his efforts to identify and differentiate the crucial nuances. The upshot is that every idea in these pages appears only as the *idea of someone*, as the ideological projection of that idea into theory itself from an identifiable political or artistic operation.

We might say that philosophy, for Rancière, is a sort of unity-of-theory-and-practice. This is to say that it works with concepts, but that those concepts are also forms of practice. Two major ways of using concepts appear to distinguish themselves: there are those philosophers who seek to impose rigid ontological separations onto the world – which, as we have seen, is for Rancière ultimately complicit with the repressive social order – and there are philosophers who adhere to the presupposition of the equality of intelligences. What Rancière shows, again reminiscent of Althusser, is that both usages of concepts are unable to be debated in a disinterested philosophical way without the uncomfortable imposition of practical implications. Here, however, Rancière distinguishes himself

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from Althusser, for whom such implications were always identifiable with a integrated set of prescribable practical commitments; for Rancière, the gap between the knowledge yielded by thought and political stances is irreducible. In this he is closer to Foucault (or, indeed, more Foucauldian than Foucault himself was<sup>6</sup>): he renounces all transitivity between theory and politics or art, that is to say all assertions that aim to control the effects of his knowledge. This has practical effects in itself, insofar as instead of shooting down false appearances and claiming to be leading the good practice, he, more modestly, and perhaps more effectively, points us to the independent, demonstrative power of *the multiplicity of local and precarious instances of political and artistic innovation.*

The final essay, 'The Use of Distinction', deals with the ontological structure underlying his practice of writing as opposed to other recent radical theories of the political and the aesthetic. The discussion here ultimately turns on the status of the concept of *dissensus* itself. The question of how to understand the emergence of events that are heterogeneous to the established order is a preoccupation that Rancière shares with such contemporary thinkers as Badiou, Agamben, Negri and Žižek. His extremely instructive discussion presents the alternative in stark terms: either dissensus can be thought, with the above-mentioned thinkers, as emerging due to the power of an ontological (or non-ontological) difference, or can be based upon paradoxical forms of action and experience induced by the egalitarian presupposition. Either dissensus is configured in a way that works to shore up a specific *place* for philosophy as master discourse, or it does so in a way that eschews all notion of philosophy's place, situating it, in egalitarian fashion, in the intervals between discourses, between philosophy and non-philosophy. Again the lesson is that real effects of dissensus are only ever created by relating a world in which it is supposed that the power of the heterogeneous is grounded in a distinct ontological difference with a world in which heterogeneity is cast as the reworking, *après coup*, of partitions of space and time according to the presupposition of the equality of intelligences.

Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics continues to stimulate debate. It offers us some of the most productive solutions to questions of political subjectivation and aesthetic experience, as well as insightful analyses of the conjuncture. Ultimately, however, his concepts are not merely presented as fodder for academic debate; the challenge that they throw out to us, and the test of their pertinence, is one of their usefulness.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Ten Theses on Politics<sup>1</sup>

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*Thesis 1. Politics is not the exercise of power. Politics ought to be defined in its own terms as a specific mode of action that is enacted by a specific subject and that has its own proper rationality. It is the political relationship that makes it possible to conceive of the subject of politics, not the other way round.*

Politics, when identified with the exercise of power and the struggle for its possession, is dispensed with from the outset. More, when conceived as a theory – or investigation into grounds of legitimacy – of power, its type of thinking is also dispensed with. If politics has a specificity that makes it other than a more capacious mode of grouping or a form of power characterized by its mode of legitimation, it is that it concerns a distinctive kind of subject, and that it concerns this subject in the form of a mode of relation that is proper to it. This is exactly what Aristotle says in Book I of the *Politics*, when he distinguishes political rule (as the ruling of equals) from all other kinds of rule; and again in Book III, when he defines the citizen as ‘he who partakes in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled’. Everything about politics is contained in this specific relationship, this ‘partaking’ (*avoir-part*)<sup>2</sup> that needs to be interrogated as to its meaning and conditions of possibility.

An interrogation into what is ‘proper’ to politics must be distinguished carefully from the current and widespread propositions regarding the return of the political. The context of state consensus that has developed since the 1990s has brought with it a profusion of affirmations proclaiming the end of the illusion of the social and a return to a ‘pure’ form of

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politics. These affirmations generally also draw on the above-mentioned Aristotelian texts, read through the interpretations of Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt. In these interpretations the 'proper' political order is generally identified with that of the *eu zen* (living with a view to a good), in contrast to the *zen* (conceived as an order of basic life). As a result, the boundary between the political and the domestic becomes the boundary between the political and the social; and the ideal of a city-state defined by its common good is set in contrast to the sad reality of a modern democracy cast as the rule of the masses and necessity. In practice, this celebration of pure politics relinquishes the virtue associated with the political good, handing it over to governmental oligarchies enlightened by their experts. This is to say that the supposed purification of the political, freed from domestic and social necessity, is tantamount to the pure and simple reduction of the political to the state (*l'étatique*).

Behind the buffoonery of today's proclaimed 'returns' of the political and of political philosophy, there lies a fundamental vicious circle that characterizes political philosophy itself. This vicious circle consists in the particular way in which the relation between the political relationship and the political subject gets interpreted; that is, in the assumption that there is a way of life that is 'specific' to political existence, enabling us to infer the political relationship from the properties of a specific order of being and to construe it in terms of the existence of a figure possessing a specific good or universality, by contrast with the private or domestic world of needs and interests. Politics, in a nutshell, comes to be seen as the accomplishment of the way of life proper to those who are destined to it. The very partition that in fact forms the object of politics thus comes to be posited as its foundation.

So, conceived as a specific way of life, the specificity of politics is dispensed with from the start. Politics cannot be defined on the basis of any pre-existing subject. The 'difference' specific to politics, that which makes it possible to think its subject, must be sought in the form of its relation. In the above-mentioned Aristotelian definition of the citizen, the subject (*politès*) is given a name defined by a *partaking* (*metexis*) both in a form of action (*arkhêin*) and in the passibility corresponding to this action (*arkhêsthai*). If there is something 'proper' to politics, it consists entirely in this relationship, which is not a relationship between subjects, but



between two contradictory terms that define a subject. Politics disappears the moment this knot between a subject and a relation is undone, which is exactly what occurs in all the speculative and empiricist fictions that seek the origin of the political relationship in the properties of its subjects and the conditions of their coming together. The traditional question 'For what reason do human beings gather into political communities?' is always already a response, resulting in the disappearance of the object it professes to be explaining or founding – that is, the form of political partaking that then vanishes in the play of elements or atoms of sociability.

*Thesis 2. What is specific to politics is the existence of a subject defined by its participation in contraries. Politics is a paradoxical form of action.*

Formulations that define politics as the ruling (*commandment*) of equals, and the citizen as the one who *partakes* in ruling and being ruled, articulate a paradox which demands a rigorous conceptualization. If we are to understand the originality of the Aristotelian formulation, banal representations of the *doxa* of parliamentary systems that invoke the reciprocity of rights and duties must be set aside. The Aristotelian formulation speaks to us of a being that is at once the agent of an action and the matter upon which that action is exercised. It contradicts the conventional logic of action according to which there exists an agent endowed with a specific capacity to produce an effect upon an object, which, in its turn, is characterized by its aptitude for receiving that and only that effect. This problem is by no means resolved through the classical opposition that distinguishes between two modes of action, a *poiesis* governed by the model of fabrication which gives form to matter, and a *praxis* that subtracts from this relation the 'inter-being' (*l'inter-être*)<sup>3</sup> of people committed to political action. We know that this opposition, relaying that of *zen* and *eu zen*, underpins a specific conception of political purity. In Hannah Arendt's work, for instance, the order of *praxis* is an order of equals who are in possession of the power of the *arkhêin*, that is the power to begin anew (*commencer*): 'To act, in its most general sense', she explains in *The Human Condition*, 'means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *arkhêin*, "to begin," "to lead," and eventually "to rule" indicates)'; she concludes

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this thought by going on to link *arkhêin* to 'the principle of freedom'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, once a sole proper mode and world of action is defined, a vertiginous short-cut enables one to posit a series of equations between 'commencement', 'ruling', 'being free' and living in a *polis* (as Arendt puts it 'to be free and to live in a *polis* is the same thing'). This series of equations finds its equivalent in the movement that engenders civic equality in the community of Homeric heroes; equals they are in their participation in the power of *arkhê*.

The first to bear witness against this Homeric idyllic is Homer himself. Against Thersites the 'garrulous', the one who is an able public speaker but has no particular entitlement to speak, Ulysses reminds us of the fact that the Greek army has one and only one chief: Agamemnon. He thereby reminds us of the meaning of *arkhêin*: to walk at the head. And if there is one who walks at the head, then the others must necessarily walk behind. The line between the power of *arkhêin* (i.e. the power to rule), freedom and the *polis*, is not straight but broken. As confirmation of the point, we need only look at the way in which Aristotle characterizes the three possible classes of rule within a *polis*, each of which possesses a particular title: 'virtue' for the *aristoi*, 'wealth' for the *oligoi* and 'freedom' for the *demos*. In this division, the 'freedom' of the *demos* comes to appear as a paradoxical part, one that, as the Homeric hero tells us, and in no uncertain terms, has only one thing to do: stay silent and submit.

In short, the opposition between *praxis* and *poiesis* by no means enables us to resolve the paradoxical definition of the *politês*. As far as the *arkhê* is concerned, conventional logic posits, as with everything else, the existence of a particular disposition to act that is exercised upon a particular disposition to 'be acted upon'. The logic of *arkhê* thus presupposes that a determinate superiority is exercised over an equally determinate inferiority. For a political subject – and therefore for politics – to come to pass, it is necessary to break with this logic.

*Thesis 3. Politics is a specific break with the logic of the arkhê. It does not simply presuppose a break with the 'normal' distribution of positions that defines who exercises power and who is subject to it. It also requires a break with the idea that there exist dispositions 'specific' to these positions.*

In Book III of the *Laws* (690e), Plato undertakes a systematic inventory of the qualifications (*axiomata*) required for governing and the correlative

qualifications for being ruled. Of the seven that he retains, four are traditional qualifications for positions of authority and are based on a natural difference, that is, the difference of birth. Those qualified to rule are those 'born before' or 'born otherwise'. This is what grounds the power of parents over children, the old over the young, masters over slaves and nobles over serfs. The fifth qualification is introduced as the principle of principles, the one that informs all other natural differences: it is the power of those with a superior nature, of the strong over the weak – a power that has the unfortunate quality, discussed at length in the *Gorgias*, of being strictly indeterminate. In Plato's eyes, the only worthy qualification is the sixth one: the power of those who know over those who do not. There are thus four pairs of traditional qualifications, which are in turn subordinated to two theoretical pairs: natural superiority and the rule of science. The list ought to stop there. However, Plato lists a seventh possible qualification for determining who is able to exercise the *arkhê*. He calls it 'the choice of God' or, otherwise said, the 'drawing of lots'. Plato does not expand upon this, but clearly this choice of regime, ironically said to be 'of God', also refers to the regime that only a god could save: democracy. So, democracy is characterized by the drawing of lots, or the complete absence of any entitlement to govern. It is the state of exception in which no oppositions can function, in which there is no principle for the dividing up of roles. 'To partake in ruling and in being ruled' is something rather different to reciprocity. On the contrary, the exceptional essence of this relationship is constituted by an absence of reciprocity; and this absence of reciprocity rests on the paradox of a qualification that is an absence of qualification. Democracy is the specific situation in which it is the absence of entitlement that entitles one to exercise the *arkhê*. It is the commencement without commencement, a form of rule (*commandement*) that does not command. In this logic the specificity of the *arkhê* – its redoubling, that is, the fact that it always precedes itself in the circle of its own disposition and exercise – is destroyed. But this situation of exception is identical with the very condition that more generally makes politics in its specificity possible.

*Thesis 4. Democracy is not a political regime. As a rupture in the logic of the arkhê, that is, of the anticipation of ruling in its disposition, it is the very regime of politics itself as a form of relationship that defines a specific subject.*

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What makes possible the *metexis* proper to politics is a break with all the logics that allocate parts according to the exercise of the *arkhê*. The 'liberty' of the people, which constitutes the axiom of democracy, has as its real content a break with the axiom of domination, that is, any sort of correlation between a capacity for ruling and a capacity for being ruled. The citizen who takes part 'in ruling and in being ruled' is only conceivable on the basis of the *demos* as figure that breaks with all forms of correspondence between a series of correlated capacities.

So, democracy is not a political regime in the sense that it forms one of the possible constitutions which define the ways in which people assemble under a common authority. Democracy is the very institution of politics itself – of its subject and of the form of its relationship.

Democracy, we know, was a term invented by its opponents, by all those who had an 'entitlement' to govern – seniority, birth, wealth, virtue or knowledge. In using the word democracy as a term of derision, these opponents marked an unprecedented reversal in the order of things: the 'power of the *demos*' referred to the fact that those who rule are those whose only commonality is that they have no entitlement to govern. Before being the name of a community, the *demos* is the name of a part of the community: the poor. But the 'poor', precisely, does not designate an economically disadvantaged part of the population, but simply the people who do not count, who have no entitlement to exercise the power of the *arkhê*, none for which they might be counted.

This is exactly what Homer says in the above-mentioned episode of Thersites. If they insist on speaking out, Ulysses will strike anyone belonging to the *demos* – to the undifferentiated collection of the 'unaccounted for' (*anarithmoi*) – in the back with his sceptre. This is not a deduction but a definition. To be of the *demos* is to be outside of the count, to have no speech to be heard. This point is illustrated in a remarkable passage of Book XII of the *Iliad*. In this passage, Polydamas complains to Hector for having disregarded his opinion. With you, he says, 'if one belongs to the *demos* one has no right to speak'. Only Polydamas is not a villain like Thersites; he is Hector's brother. The term '*demos*' does not designate a socially inferior category. The one who belongs to the *demos*, who speaks when he is not to speak, is the one who partakes in what he has no part in.

*Thesis 5. The people that comprises the subject of democracy, and thus the atomic subject of politics, is neither the collection of members of the community, nor the labouring classes of the population. It is the supplementary part in relation to every count of the parts of the population, making it possible to identify 'the count of the uncounted' with the whole of the community.*

The people (*demos*) exists only as a rupture with the logic of *arkhê*, a rupture with the logic of commencement/commandment. It can be identified neither with the race of those who recognize each other as having the same beginning or birth, nor with a part or sum of the parts, of the population. The people is the supplement that disjoins the population from itself, by suspending all logics of legitimate domination. This disjunction is well-illustrated in the crucial reform that gave rise to Athenian democracy, namely that effected by Cleisthenes' redrawing of the territorial distribution of the city's *demes*.<sup>5</sup> By constituting the tribes on the basis of three distinct types of regional distribution – a city constituency, a coastal one and an inland one – Cleisthenes broke with the ancient principle that subjected tribes to the rule of local aristocratic chieftainships, the real content of whose power, legitimated through legendary birth, was the economic power of landowners. In sum, the people as such consists in an artifice that cuts through the logic that runs from the principle of birth to the principle of wealth. It is an abstract supplement in relation to any actual (ac)count of the parts of the population, of their qualifications for partaking in the community and of the common shares that they are due by virtue of these qualifications. The people is a supplementary existence that inscribes the count of the uncounted, or part of those who have no part – that is, in the last instance, the equality of speaking beings without which inequality itself is inconceivable. These expressions are to be understood not in a populist but in a structural sense. It is not the labouring and suffering populace that emerges on the terrain of political action and that identifies its name with that of the community. The 'all' of the community named by democracy is an empty, supplementary part that separates the community out from the sum of the parts of the social body. This initial separation founds politics as the action of supplementary subjects, inscribed as a surplus in relation to every count of the parts of society.

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The core of the question of politics, then, resides in the interpretation of this void and surplus. Critiques hoping to discredit democracy persistently reduce the constitutive 'nothing' of the political people to the surfeit (*trop-plein*) of the greedy masses and the ignorant populace. An interpretation of democracy by Claude Lefort confers a structural sense on the democratic void.<sup>6</sup> But this theory of the void can be interpreted in two ways. According to the first, the void is an-archy, the absence of any legitimacy of power and itself constitutive of the very nature of political space. According to the second, the void emerged via the 'dis-incorporation' of the king's two bodies, human and divine. Democracy, according to this latter view, begins with the king's murder, when the symbolic collapses to produce a disembodied social presence. This originary link is said to involve an original temptation to create an imaginary re-construction of a glorious body of the people, itself heir to the immortal body of the king and the basis of all forms of totalitarianism. Contrary to this interpretation, it can be argued that the people's two bodies are not a modern consequence of the act of sacrificing the sovereign body, but instead a constitutive given of politics itself. It is initially the people, and not the king, that has a double body. And this duality is nothing but the supplement by which politics, itself, exists as a supplement to every social (ac)count and in exception to every logic of domination.

The seventh qualification is 'god's part', says Plato. It is my contention that the part that 'belongs to god', that is, the qualification of those who have no qualification, contains all that is theological in politics. Present-day focus on the theme of the 'theologico-political' dissolves the question of politics into that of power and of the originary situation that founds it. It serves to re-double the liberal fiction of the contract with a representation of an originary sacrifice. But the dividing of the *arkhê* that founds politics, and thus democracy, is not a founding sacrifice. It is the neutralization of every sacrificial body. The fable form of this neutralization can be read at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*: it is at the price of the disappearance of the sacrificial body, of not going to seek Oedipus' corpse, that Athenian democracy receives the beneficial effects of its burial. To want to disinter the body is not only to associate the democratic form with a scenario of sin or of original malediction. More radically, it involves reducing the logic of politics to the question of an originary scene of power, that is to say reducing politics to the state. By interpreting the

empty part in terms of psychosis, the dramaturgy of original symbolic catastrophe transforms the political exception into a sacrificial symptom of democracy: it subsumes the litigiousness proper to politics under any number of versions of man's originary sin or murder.

*Thesis 6. If politics is the tracing of a vanishing difference with respect to the distribution of social parts and shares, it follows that its existence is by no means necessary, but that it occurs as an always provisional accident within the history of forms of domination. It also follows that the essential object of political dispute is the very existence of politics itself.*

Politics is by no means a reality that might be deduced from the necessities leading people to gather in communities. Politics is an exception in relation to the principle<sup>s</sup> according to which this gathering occurs. The 'normal' order of things is for human communities to gather under the rule of those who are qualified to rule and whose qualifications are evident by dint of their very rule. The various governmental qualifications are ultimately reducible to two major titles. The first returns society to the order of filiation, human and divine. This is the power of birth. The second returns society to the vital principle of its activities. This is the power of wealth. The 'normal' evolution of society, then, presents itself in the form of a progression from a government of birth to a government of wealth. Politics exists as a deviation from this normal order of things. It is this anomaly that is expressed in the nature of political subjects, which are not social groups but rather forms of inscription that (ac)count for the unaccounted.

Politics exists insofar as the people is not identified with a race or a population, nor the poor with a particular disadvantaged sector, nor the proletariat with a group of industrial workers, etc., but insofar as these latter are identified with subjects that inscribe, in the form of a supplement to every count of the parts of society, a specific figure of the count of the uncounted or of the part of those without part. That this part exists is the very stake of politics itself. Political conflict does not involve an opposition between groups with different interests. It forms an opposition between logics that count the parties and parts of the community in different ways. The combat between the 'rich' and the 'poor' is one over the very possibility of splitting these words into two, of instituting them as categories that inscribe another (ac)count of the

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community. Two ways of counting the parts of the community exist. The first counts real parts only – actual groups defined by differences in birth, and by the different functions, places and interests that make up the social body to the exclusion of every supplement. The second, ‘in addition’ to this, counts a part of those without part. I call the first the *police* and the second *politics*.

*Thesis 7. Politics stands in distinct opposition to the police. The police is a distribution of the sensible (partage du 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*), the *nemeîn* upon which the *nomoi* of the community are founded. This partition should be understood in the double sense of the word: on the one hand, as that which separates and excludes; on the other, as that which allows participation. A partition of the sensible refers to the manner in which a relation between a shared common (*un commun partagé*) and the distribution of exclusive parts is determined in sensory experience. This latter form of distribution, which, by its sensory self-evidence, anticipates the distribution of part and shares (*parties*), itself presupposes a distribution of what is visible and what not, of what can be heard and what cannot.

The essence of the police lies in a partition of the sensible that is characterized by the absence of void and of supplement: society here is made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this matching of functions, places and ways of being, there is no place for any void. It is this exclusion of what ‘is not’ that constitutes the police-principle at the core of statist practices. The essence of politics consists in disturbing this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of those without part, identified with the whole of the community. Political dispute is that



which brings politics into being by separating it from the police, which causes it to disappear continually either by purely and simply denying it or by claiming political logic as its own. Politics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable.

*Thesis 8. The essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to make the world of its subjects and its operations seen. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one.*

Let us start with an empirical given: police interventions in public spaces consist primarily not in interpellating demonstrators, but in breaking up demonstrations. The police is not the law which interpellates individuals (as in Louis Althusser's 'Hey, you there!'), not unless it is confused with religious subjection.<sup>7</sup> It consists, before all else, in recalling the obviousness of what there is, or rather of what there is not, and its slogan is: 'Move along! There's nothing to see here!' The police is that which says that here, on this street, there's nothing to see and so nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space for circulating is nothing but the space of circulation. Politics, by contrast, consists in transforming this space of 'moving-along', of circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens. It consists in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it. It is the instituting of a dispute over the distribution of the sensible, over that *nemeîn* that founds every *nomos* of the community.

This partition constitutive of politics is never given in the form of fate, of a kind of property that destines or compels one to engage in politics. These properties, in their understanding as much as in their extension, are litigious. Exemplary in this regard are those properties that, for Aristotle, define the capacity for politics or the destiny of a life lived according to the good. Nothing could be clearer, so it would seem, than the deduction made by Aristotle in Book I of the *Politics*: the sign of the political nature of humans is constituted by their possession of the *logos*, which is alone able to demonstrate a community in the *aisthesis* of the just and the unjust, in contrast to the *phôné*, appropriate only for expressing feelings of pleasure and displeasure. Whoever is in the presence of an animal that possesses the ability to articulate language and its power of demonstration, knows that he is dealing with a human – and therefore political – animal.

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The only practical difficulty lies in knowing in which sign this sign can be recognized; that is, how you can be sure that the human animal mouthing a noise in front of you is actually articulating a discourse, rather than merely expressing a state of being? If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing him as the bearer of signs of politicality, by not understanding what he says, by not hearing what issues from his mouth as discourse. And the same goes for the easily invoked opposition between, on the one hand, the obscurity of domestic and private life and, on the other, the radiant luminosity of the public life of equals. Traditionally, in order to deny the political quality of a category – workers, women and so on – all that was required was to assert that they belonged to a ‘domestic’ space that was separated from public life, one from which only groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger or anger could emerge, but not actual speech demonstrating a shared *aisthesis*. And the political aspect of these categories always consists in re-qualifying these spaces, in getting them to be seen as the places of a community; it involves these categories making themselves seen or heard as speaking subjects (if only in the form of litigation) – in short, as participants in a common *aisthesis*. It consists in making what was unseen visible; in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech and in demonstrating that what appeared as a mere expression of pleasure and pain is a shared feeling of a good or an evil.

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, the constraint of which is always explicable. Now, the specificity of political dissensus is that its partners are no more constituted than is the object or stage of discussion itself. Those who make visible the fact that they belong to a shared world that others do not see – or cannot take advantage of – is the implicit logic of any pragmatics of communication. The worker who puts forward an argument about the public nature of a ‘domestic’ wage

dispute must demonstrate the world in which his argument counts as an argument and must demonstrate it as such for those who do not have the frame of reference enabling them to see it as one. Political argumentation is at one and the same time the demonstration of a possible world in which the argument could count as an argument, one that is addressed by a subject qualified to argue, over an identified object, to an addressee who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he 'normally' has no reason either to see or to hear. It is the construction of a paradoxical world that puts together two separate worlds.

Politics, then, has no proper place nor any natural subjects. A demonstration is political not because it occurs in a particular place and bears upon a particular object but rather because its form is that of a clash between two partitions of the sensible. A political subject is not a group of interests or of ideas,<sup>5</sup> but the operator of a particular *dispositif* of subjectivation and litigation through which politics comes into existence. A political demonstration is therefore always of the moment and its subjects are always precarious. A political difference is always on the shore of its own disappearance: the people are always close to sinking into the sea of the population or of the race; the proletariat is always on the verge of being confused with workers defending their interests; the space of a people's public demonstration is always prone to being confused with the merchant's *agora* and so on.

The notion that politics can be deduced from a specific world of equals or free people, as opposed to a world of lived necessity, takes as its ground precisely the object of its litigation. It thus necessarily confronts the blindness of those who 'do not see' that which has no place to be seen. Exemplary, in this regard, is a passage from Arendt's *On Revolution*, in which she comments upon a text by John Adams, who identifies the unhappiness of the poor with the fact of 'not being seen'.<sup>8</sup> Such an identification, she remarks, could itself only issue from a man that belonged to a privileged community of equals. Conversely, this is something that those comprising the categories in question could 'hardly understand'. This assertion might seem surprising given its extraordinary deafness to the multiplicity of discourses and demonstrations made by the 'poor' concerning precisely their mode of visibility. But this deafness has nothing accidental about it. It forms a circle with the act of qualifying as an original partition founding politics what is in fact the permanent object of litigation that constitutes politics. It forms a circle with the defining of *homo laborans* within a division of 'ways of life'.

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This circle is not specific to such-or-such a theoretician; it is the very circle of 'political philosophy' itself.

*Thesis 9. Inasmuch as the province of political philosophy lies in grounding political action in a specific mode of being, it works essentially to efface the litigiousness constitutive of politics. Philosophy effects this effacement in its very description of the world of politics. Moreover, the effectiveness of this effacement is also perpetuated in non-philosophical or anti-philosophical descriptions of the world.*

That the distinguishing feature of politics is the existence of a subject who 'rules' by the very fact of having no qualifications to rule; that the principle of commencement/ruling is irremediably divided as a result of this and that the political community is essentially a litigious community – such is the secret of politics first encountered by philosophy. If we can speak of the 'Ancients' as having a privilege over the 'Moderns', it resides in their having been the first to perceive this secret and not in their having been the first to contrast the community of the 'good' with that of the 'useful'. Concealed under the anodyne expression 'political philosophy' is the violent encounter between philosophy and the exception to the law of *arkhê* proper to politics, not to mention philosophy's own effort to resituate politics under the auspices of this law. The *Gorgias*, the *Republic*, the *Statesman* and the *Laws* – all these texts testify to one and the same effort to efface the paradox or scandal arising from that 'seventh qualification' – namely, an effort to turn democracy into a simple case of the indeterminable principle of 'the government of the strongest', leaving no other solution but to contrast it with the government of experts (*des savants*). They testify to one and the same effort to place the community under a unique law of partition and to expulse the empty part of the *demos* from the body of the community.

This expulsion, however, does not simply take the form of an opposition between a good regime of a community that is both united and hierarchized according to its principle of unity, and a bad regime of division and disorder. It takes the form of a presupposition that identifies a political form with a way of life. And this presupposition is already operative in the procedures for describing 'bad' regimes, and democracy in particular. All of politics, as mentioned above, is played out in the

interpretation of democratic 'anarchy'. In identifying it with the dispersion of the desires of democratic man, Plato transforms the form of politics into a mode of existence, and the void into a surfeit. Before being the theorist of the 'ideal' or 'closed' city-state, Plato is the founder of the anthropological conception of the political, the conception that identifies politics with the deployment of the properties of a type of man or a mode of life. This kind of 'man', this 'way of being', this form of the city-state: it is here, before any discourse about the laws or the educational methods of the ideal state, before even the partition of community into classes, that the partition of the sensible cancels out political singularity.

The initial gesture of 'political philosophy' thus has a twofold consequence. On the one hand, Plato founds with it the community as that which accomplishes a principle of unity, an undivided principle – a community strictly defined as a common body, with its places and functions, and forms of internalizing the common. He finds an archi-politics<sup>9</sup> understood as a law that unifies the 'occupations' of the city-state, its 'ethos' (i.e. its way of inhabiting an abode) and its *nomos* (as law but also as the specific 'tone' according to which this *ethos* reveals itself). This etho-logy of the community once again renders indistinguishable the gap between politics and police. And political philosophy, by its desire to give to the community a single foundation, is fated to have to re-identify politics and police, to cancel out politics through the gesture of founding it.

But Plato also invented a 'concrete' mode for describing the production of political forms. In a word, he invented the very forms of contestation against the 'ideal city-state', the regulated forms of opposition between, on the one hand, philosophical 'apriorism' and, on the other, the concrete sociological or political-scientific analyses of forms of politics as an expression of ways of life. This second legacy is more profound and has been longer lasting than the first. Political philosophy's second resource – its *deuteron plous* – is a sociology of the political, through which it accomplishes (if necessary in the guise of being 'against' it) its fundamental project: to found the community on the basis of a univocal partition of the sensible. Notable here is Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of democracy, whose innumerable variants and ersatz versions feed current discourses on modern democracy, the age of the masses, the individual

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of the masses and so on. This analysis is one with the theoretical act that cancels out the structural singularity of 'the qualification without qualification' and the 'part of those without part', by re-describing democracy as a social phenomenon or as the collective effectuation of the properties of a type of man.

Conversely, assertions of the purity of *bios politicos*, of the republican constitution of the community in contrast to the individual or the democratic mass, and the opposition between the political and the social, contribute to the efficacy of that same knot between the *a-priorism* of the 'republican' re-founding and the sociological description of democracy. The opposition between the political and the social, regardless of where one begins, is defined entirely within the frame of political philosophy; that is to say, it lies at the heart of the philosophical repression of politics. The current proclamations of a 'return to politics' and to 'political philosophy' merely imitate the originary gesture of 'political philosophy' but without actually grasping the principles or issues at stake in it. In this sense, they mark a radical forgetting of politics and of the tense relationship between politics and philosophy. Both the sociological theme of the 'end of politics' in postmodern society and the 'political' theme of the 'return of politics' originate in political philosophy's initial twofold act and combine to bring about the same forgetting of politics.

*Thesis 10. The 'end of politics' and the 'return of politics' are two complementary ways of cancelling out politics in the simple relationship between a state of the social and a state of the state apparatus. 'Consensus' is the common name given to this cancellation.*

The essence of politics resides in the modes of dissensual subjectivation that reveal a society in its difference to itself. The essence of consensus, by contrast, does not consist in peaceful discussion and reasonable agreement, as opposed to conflict or violence. Its essence lies in the annulment of dissensus as separation of the sensible from itself, in the nullification of surplus subjects, in the reduction of the people to the sum of the parts of the social body and of the political community to the relations between the interests and aspirations of these different parts. Consensus consists, then, in the reduction of politics to the police. Consensus is the 'end of politics': in other words, not the accomplishment

of the ends of politics but simply a return to the normal state of things – the non-existence of politics. The ‘end of politics’ is the ever-present shore of politics (*le bord de la politique*), itself an activity that is always of the moment and provisional. The expressions ‘return of politics’ and ‘end of politics’ encapsulate two symmetrical interpretations that both produce the same effect: an effacing of the concept of politics itself and the precariousness that is one of its essential elements. The so-called return of the political, in proclaiming a return to pure politics and thus an end to the usurpations of the social, simply occludes the fact that the social is by no means a particular sphere of existence but instead a disputed object of politics. Consequently, the end of the social that it proclaims is simply no more than the end of political litigation over the partition of worlds. The ‘return of politics’ thus boils down to the assertion that there is a specific place for politics. Isolated in this manner, this specific place can be nothing but the place of the state. So, the theorists of the ‘return of politics’ in fact announce its extinction. They identify it with the practices of state, the very principle of which consists in the suppression of politics.

Symmetrically, the sociological thesis announcing the ‘end of politics’ posits the existence of a state of the social in which politics no longer has any necessary reason for being; whether this is because it has accomplished its ends by bringing this state into being (the exoteric American Hegelian-Fukayama-ist version) or because its forms are no longer adapted to the fluidity and artificiality of present-day economic and social relations (the esoteric European Heideggerian-Situationist version). The thesis thus amounts to asserting that the logical *telos* of capitalism entails the extinction of politics. It concludes, then, either by mourning the loss of politics in the face of a triumphant, and now immaterial, Leviathan, or by its transformation into broken-up, segmented, cybernetic, ludic and other forms that match those of the social pertaining to the highest stage of capitalism. It thus fails to recognize that, in actual fact, politics has no reason for being in any state of the social and that the contradiction between these two logics is an invariant given defining the contingency and precariousness specific to politics. This is to say that, via a Marxist detour, this thesis validates in its own way two further theses: that of political philosophy which grounds politics in a particular mode of life and the consensual thesis that identifies the political community with the social body, and thereby also political

## **DISSENSUS**

practice with state activity. The debate between those philosophers who proclaim the 'return of politics' and the sociologists who profess its 'end' is therefore scarcely more than a simple debate over the appropriate order in which to read the presuppositions of political philosophy, for the purpose of interpreting the consensualist practice of annihilating politics.