

Rancière on the politics of exclusion

✍ *Claude Mangion •*



Jacques Rancière's writings on political philosophy are generating increasing interest for their novel and radical way of re-thinking politics within the framework of equality. Although I am not sure he would accept the label, his writings have attracted the interest of anarchist philosophers for they provide a critique of the existing social order with its inbuilt structural inequalities together with a theory of democratic participation that runs counter to our commonplace assumptions of democratic practice.

Apart from his political writings, it must be said that Rancière has contributed to several other intellectual areas: he has written on aesthetics, cinema, and literature in his later texts, as well as conducted archival work and theoretical analyses in his earlier ones. The depth and range of his writings have made it difficult to classify him within any clear-cut category of studies, but in each of these areas the challenge to our customary way of think retains its critical edge.

In this paper, I would like to show that the functioning of a political system necessitates perpetuating a logic of inclusions and exclusions. In a number of his texts, Rancière critically exposes the underlying logic of exclusion at work in certain political systems and at the same time presenting an alternative vision.

Situating Rancière

A key to understanding Rancière's political philosophy is his critical relationship to Althusser whose seminars he had attended as a student. A central tenet of Althusser's political philosophy as formulated in *Reading Capital* (2009) is the distinction between science and ideology.

This distinction can be roughly described as having two characteristics: (a) it is the expression of the beliefs, values and attitudes of a particular society; (b) it functions to maintain the power structures of a social order. On this account, both philosophy and politics belong to the sphere of ideology operating so as to hide the way society and political relations really exist.

Althusser opposes ideology to his version of scientific Marxism which he articulates as the discipline that identifies the real power structures and dominant forces in a society. Scientific Marxism exposes the ideological expressions that mask the realities that unfold within a society. It was only his scientific Marxism that could adopt the mantle of being the agent for change by transforming ideological concepts into scientific ones, and thereby revealing the oppressive forms of domination maintaining a society.

In *Althusser's Lesson* (2011) Rancière's responds to this central distinction of Althusser. He argues that: (a) by privileging science, Althusser reinforces the privilege attributed to the Marxist theoretician insofar as it is the Marxist who knows how to identify the ideological expressions circulating in society, whereas the 'ordinary' workers remains trapped within the imaginary ideological world. Marxism, on Althusser's account, posits itself as an epistemologically superior practice that only can lead everyone else. In effect, what this amounts to is that one structural inequality is replaced by another; (b) by constituting ideology as a totality, it ceases to be the 'site of struggle'. Since Althusser's formulation of ideology

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subsumes within it all expressive forms, then ideology itself becomes a space without contrary forms of opposition; the result, as Rancière points out, is that it normalizes society, making it seem that everything is as it should be, and therefore without any motivation for change. Society - as a space within which the reality of struggle unfolds - is neutralised into a seamless totality.

The difference between Althusser and Rancière can be viewed from within the broader perspective of the competing philosophical positions of the time. Althusser's Marxism was indebted to structural linguistics with its focus on the construction of signs and discourse, with ideology itself formulated as a discourse that the scientific Marxist needs to unmask. Rancière opposed this concept of ideology localising it instead within material conditions of existence: it is 'a power organised in a collection of institutions' (Rancière 2011, p. 142). This is why, for him, an ideological conflict can never be merely a conflict of signs unfolding at an abstract level, but rather, an actual struggle located within the material world.

While Tanke (2011) has pointed out that Rancière's early text on Althusser does not explicitly tackle the question of equality that will become central to his later political writings, the logic of inclusion and exclusion operating within a society is an explicit critique of Althusser insofar as the latter's valorisation of scientific Marxism operates through a system of exclusions, ironically that of the workers.

Underlying Althusser's contention that scientific Marxism was necessary to lead the workers was the assumption that the workers cannot think for themselves, but need someone else to think for them.¹ In *The Nights of Labour* (1989) Rancière undertakes archival research, where he finds evidence contrary to the widespread belief that workers identified themselves strictly and enthusiastically in terms of the manual labour they performed and were therefore considered incapable of

intellectual activities. This form of exclusion was common to western political philosophy even among theorists who spoke on behalf of the left.

The origin of Rancière's archival project began with the aim of researching historical documents for 'primitive revolutionary manifestoes' so as to discover what the workers themselves said of their situation, to discover the 'authentic' voice of the workers,² rather than what others said for them. He wanted to hear their own voices, much like Foucault had worked with prisoners' groups so as to create their own voice. This is why Rancière refused to categorize or correct their works since doing so would have positioned him as their representative, their voice.

However, this initial project was abandoned as Rancière discovered that no such manifestoes existed. What he did discover was that the workers, far from being interested in their class consciousness or in taking pride in their own work, copied the bourgeois by producing poems, stories, essays and publishing them. What is interesting is that the workers, despite their long days of manual labour, enjoyed expressing their creativity in literary forms. It was only by repressing this aspect of workers' lives that subsequent histories could claim that the workers were proud of their identities as workers. The upshot of Rancière's analysis is that the strict categorisation of workers - that excluded them from intellectual pursuits by defining them according to a certain concept of class - is undermined. And the celebration of artistic expression was not merely an escapist strategy but required a mastery of aesthetic forms previously reserved for the few, a mastery that they were not considered capable of.

For Rancière, this celebration of aesthetic forms had a more far reaching effect than just the 'right' to enjoying oneself aesthetically as it entailed a re-configuration of the space-time continuum that was deemed appropriate for workers. Instead of doing as they were told and

remaining at home to sleep and prepare for the next day's work, workers met at night to produce and share their literary works. In a sense, Rancière's analysis shows that pleasure is transformed into a revolutionary activity for it disrupted the logic that excluded workers from aesthetic creativity. In effect, pleasure becomes not merely an escape from the drudgery of manual labour but a contestation of the way roles are distributed in society: 'A worker who had never learned how to write and yet tried to compose verses to suit the taste of his times was perhaps more of a danger to the prevailing ideological order than a worker who performed revolutionary songs.' (cited in Rancière 2004a, p. xi)

Plato's exclusions

The politics of exclusion and inclusion is elaborated upon in *The Philosopher and his Poor* (2004a) which provides a further elaboration of the challenge to the strict identities that are attributed to workers, a position that seems to pervade the history of philosophy. Traditionally, philosophy considers itself as a strictly intellectual discipline positioned in opposition to manual work with workers incapable of theoretical thought. Rancière discusses this notion of the excluded workers in a number of theorists, ranging from Plato to Marx, Sartre and extensively in Bourdieu. For the purposes of this article I am narrowing my discussion to his views on Plato.

In the *Republic* Plato outlines his vision of the ideal state and the requirements for having an ordered and stable society. This founding text of western political philosophy segregates its citizens according to the capabilities, but these capabilities are grounded in the nature of the person. The operating principle by which the ideal state can maximize itself is expressed in the following way: '...productivity is increased, the quality of the products is improved, and the process is simplified when an individual sets aside his other pursuits, does the one thing for

which he is naturally suited, and does it at the opportune moment.' (Plato 1993, p.60)

As the city develops from a few individuals into a more complex social dynamic replete with material and artistic productions, Plato installs the philosophers as the ones who oversee this development making sure that 'they do not engage in any work which does not tend towards this goal.' (Plato 1993, p. 91). Interestingly it is philosophy that marks out these different domains, that attributes to itself the task of thinking, while positing its Others, the artisans as capable only of manual work. Within the ideal state each class is designated its particular place in society. In effect, what this amounts to is an assignment of roles specific to one's class, each of which excluding the other(s).

The question that interests Rancière concerns the way such roles are justified; what are the means used by Plato to legitimise such a strict demarcation of roles? In order to explain the 'order of the city' Plato, (in)famously introduces the 'noble lie' where social classes are likened to different metals - gold, silver and iron - with different values associated with them and are segregated accordingly. The incompatibility between the metals is meant to justify the segregation between the classes.

The paradox at the heart of Plato's discussion is that if the philosopher is supposed to be the upholder of truth, then why does he need to recourse to a lie (whether noble or not) to convince others of their place in society. The paradox is more glaring because it is usually Plato's enemies - the sophists, poets, and painters - who engage in the dubious practice of lying, in the fabrication of appearances that might seem to be true but are not. What is the difference between their lies and the lie of the philosopher?

Rancière argues that Plato's strategy for highlighting the difference between the two kinds of lie: (a) the first difference focuses on the similarity of motivation of the workers and the sophists, poets and

painters as opposed to the motivations of the philosopher. Just as the workers are paid for their endeavours so too are the sophists, poets and artists expect financial remuneration for their productions. Philosophy differs from its others because it is not motivated by financial reward, but for the love of truth; (b) the second difference is cognitive; the question of why philosophy needs to lie is answered by situating philosophy as an epistemological superior mode of knowing. When philosophers utter the noble lie, they know what they are doing- they know when and how to lie. Again, the capability of this knowledge is the result of Plato's view that a person should follow his/her nature, and it is the nature of philosophy to know the distinction between the true and the false.

In the 'order of discourse' Rancière identifies another argument that Plato deploys so as to exclude anything that might disrupt the order of the state. This argument refers to the passage in the *Phaedrus*, where Plato opposes and privileges - as Derrida had already shown - the spoken to the written word. What interests Rancière in this passage is the role of writing as a 'usurper' of the order established within the city. Writing usurps because it does not remain tied to its place, but 'drifts' across various hands. This lengthy citation sums up the threat of writing as a mute discourse, which knows neither its audience nor their needs, can transmit anything anywhere. It does not know to whom it is speaking, to whom it should speak, who can and cannot be admitted to a sharing [partage] of the *logos*. The living *logos* of the philosophers, the science of truth and lying, is also a science of speech and silence. It knows the right time for keeping quiet. Written discourse, on the other hand, is as incapable of keeping quiet as it is of speaking. Mute in the face of philosophers' question, it cannot restrain itself from speaking to the uninitiated. (Rancière 2004a, p.40)

The philosopher, as represented by

the spoken word and its application through the dialectic, is no longer the figure of authority, since the written text can be accessed by anyone. And, for Plato, this constitutes the threat to the ordered city since the written word enables disorder - the confusion and destabilisation of roles - to undermine it.

On Rancière's account, we can understand why Plato banished the rhetoricians, sophists and writing from the city because it is these that make possible the contamination of the 'purity' of the roles within the city. By having access to written texts, not only is the segregation of the philosopher-rulers, soldiers and workers disrupted, but the workers can challenge the philosophers in a literal displacement of roles.

In order to establish the purity of philosophy as an activity of thought, its non-thinking Others are located in an inferior position within the social order whereby each fulfils his sole function. This is why Plato would have all those who are engaged in imitation expelled from the city since imitation - and in particular the kind of imitation performed on stage - means that a person can copy another. The idea is introduced that another type of social order might be possible, a social order where the established hierarchies are different. It is the task of Plato's philosophy to ensure that such a possibility will never be actualized; the formation of the social order is overseen by the philosopher who ensures that the structured relations are distributed according to the nature of each.

Disagreement and the partition of the sensible

Rancière's political thought offers a different perspective on what is customarily taken for as politics. In *Disagreements* (1998) he develops his views on politics utilising the concept of disagreement together with the concept of equality as the basis for his political philosophy. Disagreement is defined as 'to mean a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the

interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying'. (1998: x) The concept of disagreement ties in with the concept of equality and democratic practice because those who disagree with the hierarchical system are those who can speak, but who - whatever they say - are not worth listening to because they are irrelevant. Even though they can speak, they have no place, no voice within the social order. As May writes, ...disagreement concerns who gets to speak, whose voice counts. And more deeply, it concerns who actually has a voice, who is capable of speech. Workers' demands, women's demands, the demands of those who are marginalized by race, class, immigration status and so on are not recognised as demands because they are not recognised as issuing from people capable of making real demands. (2010, p. 74)

As a point of departure, Rancière argues that we live within a given social world that is already partitioned with roles distributed such that some members within it maintain positions of domination. There is clearly a hierarchy at work that constitutes an unequal social order. This might seem like a fairly obvious observation of society, but the interesting feature is that inequality necessarily requires as a minimum, a degree of equality. It is a structural necessity. What Rancière means by this is that persons in society presuppose or assume that they are equal to others. It is when this presupposition of equality is denied to them that they realise that there are being treated unequally. This is why it is crucial for Rancière to highlight equality as a structural feature or an inherent part of a society. By so doing, inequalities are exposed thus making it possible to challenge or resist them. Since there is nothing natural about these inequalities, since they are purely contingent features of society, then there is nothing to prevent such hierarchies from being changed.

Rancière's thinking on equality is

crucially tied to his views on the political in a broadly construed sense. It is fairly obvious that in the contemporary world there is a widespread disillusionment with political issues. This sense of disillusion has arisen because of the predominance of economics in political thought with politics transformed into a tool for managing the economy, as opposed to an activity that seeks to eliminate injustices from the world.

Rancière opposes this widespread view of politics-as-economics arguing instead, for a politics-as-disagreement. A useful entry point into Rancière's thinking about disagreement is by recalling the Aristotelian view of politics as an activity that is exclusive of humans insofar as humans are animals with a 'logos' i.e., reasoned speech that can discriminate between 'what is just and what is unjust', whereas animals are only capable of producing sounds 'that express pain or pleasure' (Aristotle 1932, p.11). The interesting point is that slaves had a language to the extent that they could understand the commands given to them, but their own utterances were closer to animal sounds. In effect, slaves did not have a voice because they were not recognised as beings that could have a voice. Rancière takes politics to a more fundamental level by challenging the very space of what constitutes logos and phone. While for Aristotle, language is the necessary prerequisite for reasoned political speech, for Rancière, politics entails whether one has the possibility of speaking or of being counted as relevant.

What makes his views radical is the way he conceptualises the notion of disagreement since it 'is not to do with words alone [but] bears on the very situation in which speaking parties find themselves.' (Rancière 1998, p. xi) Clearly he is not advocating the differences of opinion model that is basic to liberal-democratic models. Instead Rancière connects the concept of disagreement with the equality-inequality opposition that

underlies his analysis of society. It is the very positioning of roles within a society that - together with the material resources that come with such a role - generates disagreement. The politics of disagreement is a conflict between those who have a voice i.e., those who have a right to speak, and those who are voice-less. May expresses this point excellently, 'A disagreement, then, does not centre primarily on any set of demands that are made, but rather on who gets to speak and make demands' (2010: 74)

As can be surmised, Rancière's concept of politics is very different from the party politics that features in contemporary democratic politics. He contends that what is currently considered as politics is not really politics at all insofar as the rival political parties all have a voice and have access to material resources, but differ with respect to some issue. Rancière's analysis of politics goes much further in that it highlights those who are excluded despite their inclusion in the same social order.

The question Rancière must answer is: Given these inequalities, how is such a social system maintained? By way of answer, he introduces the concept of the police but by this he is not thinking of the police either as an institution that functions to enforce the law or of a 'police state' where the actions of members of a social order are monitored. Rather, his concept of the police and of policing is broader in that it describes the way a social order is organised into categories and roles. The maintenance and reproduction of this social order is the task of policing.

The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and see that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and of the sayable that sees that that particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.' (Rancière 1998, p. 29)

Rancière focuses on those who are excluded, on the voice-less i.e., the irrelevant, by showing that the entire social system in its functioning is maintained by the police order that ensure that the reproduction of the system as 'more of the same'. Maintaining the stability of those who are included, of those already with a voice is what constitutes contemporary politics despite the appearance of conflict. This is not Rancière's view: genuine politics is the conflict between those who have no choice, no place within the distribution of roles, and those who do. As Chambers eloquently puts it, politics 'only occurs, when the logic of domination intrinsic to any police order (since all police order are hierarchical orders) finds itself confronted with a different logic, the logic of equality.' (2011, p. 201)

The 'wronged' are those who are excluded and who, as a consequence, try to redress their situation. A wrong occurs when the presupposition of equality is negated, when the assumption that we are equal in a situation is revealed by the police order to be unequal. Political participation takes place when the hierarchies that are maintained by the police order are challenged, not merely verbally, but in the very unfolding or manifestation of the situation. The excluded are thereby suffering an injustice produced by the hierarchies within the social order itself and it is these inequalities that politics should strive to overcome.

Given his theorisation of what constitutes political activity, Rancière develops an account of democracy that can accommodate such political activity. As we can imagine, the conventional view of democracy as involving constitutions, elections and political parties that represent certain position is not his understanding of democracy. Rather, democracy is defined as 'the name of a singular disruption of this order of distribution of bodies as a community that we proposed to conceptualize in the broader concept of the police.' (Rancière

1998, p.99) Rancière's account of democracy involves challenging the politicised social field as an always already ordered whole. It is by disrupting the normal functioning of the social system that democracy comes into motion. When an inequality is recognised and those suffering from this inequality are transformed into a group, a process of subjectification has taken place.

By *subjectification* I mean the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience (Rancière 1998, p. 35)

The interesting feature of Rancière's concept of subjectification is that it transforms 'solitary' individuals into a political group, or movement. It is a process of group identity formation, such that a sense of unity is established through the sharing of a common cause that strives to overcome a wrong.⁴ Democratic activity involves the production and identification of subjects who were previously unknown, both without an identity and voice-less. As a result of the disruption of the social order, the excluded, through a process of subjectification, become a force that can challenge the social order.

The crucial feature underlying Rancière's account of democratic participation is that of the voice: by this, he means 'a capacity for communication'. It is by virtue of having the capacity to speak or to communicate more generally, that the excluded can challenge the existing order. Aside from the obvious emphasis on the voice that Derrida has alerted us to in the metaphysics of presence that characterises European thought, James (2012, p. 126) points out that by centralising speech in his revolutionary account of politics, Rancière has opened himself up to the charges that (i) his own position excludes a number of humans that might be suffering an injustice - the disabled, the very young, brain-injury

victims, and other degenerate illnesses. These are not capable of speaking for themselves and are destined to remain voice-less; (ii) animals are excluded completely so that animal rights activists find no value in his writings.

In the *Politics of Aesthetics* (2004b), subtitled 'the distribution of the sensible' Rancière continues to elaborate upon his notions of equality and inequality by reframing his discussion at the level of the senses and the relation between perception and meaning. In this way, he can show that his earlier arguments on the social order are grounded and structured at an even more fundamental level. The word 'distribution' in the subtitle is frequently also translated as 'partition' and Panagia describes it as a 'term that refers at once to the conditions for sharing that establish the contours of a collectivity (i.e., "*partager*" as sharing) and to the sources of disruption or dissensus of that same order (i.e., "*partager*" as separating)'. (2010, p. 95)

The introduction of this key term in Rancière's writings indicates that at the level of the sensory experience, the world that we perceive is both divided into categories and yet, despite this division forms the basis of a shared common world: 'A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared, and exclusive parts.' (Rancière 2004b, p. 12) The nature of the inclusions and exclusions that occur differ: the former is broader in that it includes within it a common world, a lifeworld, while the latter is more specific and is the product of the various roles within a common world. As a result of one's position within this common world, one's perception and degree of participation is affected; the exclusions that result from one's situation within the world determine a certain perception of the world. It is evident that even at the perceptual level, a logic of inclusion and exclusion is in operation: the shared world is perceived as a series of inclusions that

in turn generates its own exclusions. One might say that although these excluded bodies can be counted since they inhabit the same social space as others and therefore can be seen and heard within the sensible world, they are no-bodies, non-visible and voice-less within this shared social space.

The partitioning of the sensible is also a task performed by the police. The work of the police ensures that the portioning of the world is complete such that there are no gaps or additions to it. In effect, the police function to retain the distribution of roles within a society. Interestingly, politics occurs when two parts of the sensible - the dominated and those who dominate - are in conflict, when those included voices are challenged by the voice-less excluded.

Conclusion

Perhaps the upsurge of interest in the writings of Rancière is a testimony to the dissatisfaction with the way we have taken the organisation of our political lives for granted. Perhaps, it is being realised that the changes that have been implemented have been merely cosmetic and what is in need of change is more fundamental affecting both our perceptual and conceptual ways of organising the world. To this dissatisfaction, Rancière offers a response that entails a wholesale rethinking of our political condition, a rethinking that involves a literal shifting of our customary way of thinking politics away from certain established categories.

In this paper, I have shown that one of Rancière's fundamental political concerns involves an analysis of those processes by which the ordering of social life simultaneously includes everyone while excluding some. To do this, I have traced the way Rancière elaborates on the formation of the social as an inherent system of inclusions maintained by a process of policing. It is evident from the texts examined that the issue of excluding those who are face-less and voice-less is

one that Rancière urges us to recognise and in so doing, he issues a call to political activity that goes further than the contemporary sedimentation of democratic politics as an unacknowledged collusion between political parties.

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1. Panagia (2010, p. 98) writes that Rancière's break occurred because 'Althusser's theory of ideology creates and sustains a fundamental inequality by insisting that revolutionary movements cannot proceed without revolutionary theory. That is, Althusser's ideal of emancipation cannot work without a prior commitment to the authoritative knowledge of theory'
2. Rancière writes of this period that he wanted 'to establish what working-class tradition was, and to study how Marxism interpreted and distorted it'. For many years I took no more interest in philosophy. More specifically, I turned my back on what might be called political theories, and read nothing but archive material. I posited the existence of a specifically working-class discourse.' (cited in 2004a, p. x)
3. When the prisoners begin to speak, Foucault writes that 'they possessed an individual theory of prisons, the penal system, and justice'. (cited in Rancière, 2011, p. 119)
4. Rancière's notion of political action as the formation of a 'we' is opposed to his notion of aesthetics that describes the formation of an 'I'.