

# ON THE POSSIBILITY OF DEMOCRACY: AN INTERACTION BETWEEN THE WORKS OF JACQUES RANCIÈRE AND MARTIN HEIDEGGER

SOBRE A POSSIBILIDADE DE DEMOCRACIA: UMA INTERAÇÃO ENTRE AS  
OBRAS DE JACQUES RANCIÈRE E MARTIN HEIDEGGER

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**ABSTRACT:** In the most general sense, this essay explores a strategy for understanding how modern democracies could become more “democratic.” What is essentially at stake here is a rethinking of the *demos*, along with its relationship to a *polis*. In order to do this, I make use of Jacques Rancière’s *Disagreement* along with Martin Heidegger’s lectures on Höderlin’s hymn *Der Ister*. I argue that the interactions between these two texts provide rich soil for a radical interpretation of the meaning of “democracy.”

**KEY WORDS:** Democracy. *Demos*. Disagreement. *Polis*.

**RESUMO:** O ensaio explora, de uma maneira genérica, uma estratégia para compreender como as democracias modernas poderiam tornar-se mais “democráticas”. O que está em jogo aqui é, essencialmente, um repensar do *demos*, juntamente com a sua relação com uma *polis*. A fim de fazê-lo, recorro ao *Desacordo* de Jacques Rancière e às preleções de Martin Heidegger sobre o hino de Höderlin *Der Ister*. O meu argumento consiste em mostrar que as interações entre esses dois textos fornecem um solo fértil para uma interpretação radical do significado da “democracia”.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Democracia. *Demos*. Desacordo. *Polis*.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the central issues that Jacques Rancière investigates in *Disagreement* concerns origin and function of the various inequalities that are inscribed at the heart of historical understandings of equality from within the tradition of western political philosophy that extends back to Plato’s *Republic*. Rancière’s objective in this text is a re-examination of the meaning of democracy. One of the primary aims of this essay is to analyze Rancière’s description of the function of subjectivity in relation to the methods whereby inequalities are

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legitimized by *policing*. To do this, it will be helpful to situate Rancière's argument within the context of a few works by Michel Foucault. Foucault, toward the end of his life, began to speak more explicitly about the possibility of the development of meaningful subjectivity that is founded on individuals coming to their own conclusions about how best to live their lives. Rancière, I will argue, is in agreement with Foucault on this point, and his concern in *Disagreement* is with the formation of political subjectivity that is meaningful to each and every member of the *demos*. In addition, I would like to contrast the emergence of political subjectivity in Rancière's work with Heidegger's abandoning of the subject/object distinction in *Letter on Humanism*. My hypothesis is that Rancière's usage of the term "political subjectivity" might not escape the metaphysics of subjectivity which Heidegger shows to be problematic in his *Letter on Humanism* and elsewhere. As such, I argue that Rancière's meditations on democracy, inasmuch as they presuppose a political subjectivity, are engaged in a direct confrontation with post-Heideggerian anti-humanism. In the latter parts of this essay I explore this confrontation by attempting to unravel a few of its implications for the meaning of democracy.

## 2.

Before I examine these relationships it would be best to provide a brief overview of Rancière's political/philosophical thinking. Rancière defines politics on page 29-30 of *Disagreement*:

I propose now to reserve the term *politics* for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to *policing*: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part that has no part...an assumption that, at the end of the day itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being<sup>1</sup>.

The term politics does not refer to what its common usage denotes, but rather, it refers to practices where absolute equality is the goal. Rancière, therefore, will rename what the common usage of the term *politics* denotes: *policing*. This usage of the term *policing* implicitly references Michel Foucault's analysis of the very broad function that police played in the development of the state from the seventeenth century up until the end of the eighteenth

<sup>1</sup> RANCIÈRE, Jacques . *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. p. 29-30.

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century. Foucault states, “When people spoke about police at this moment, they spoke about the specific techniques by which a government in the framework of the state was able to govern people as individuals significantly useful for the world.”<sup>2</sup> This is made clear in a claim made by a seventeenth century political thinker named Louis Turquet de Mayerne who said “The police’s true object is man.”<sup>3</sup> Policing, therefore, is not limited to today’s police forces, but today’s police forces certainly play an important role in this broad notion of policing. The effect of *policing* is what Rancière, in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, calls the “distribution of the sensible.” Here Rancière defines this distribution as “A common world...that is a polemical distribution of modes of being and ‘occupations’ in a space of possibilities.”<sup>4</sup> The distribution of the sensible is an orientation of meaning itself. More specifically, and in relation to Rancière’s argument in *Disagreement*, the distribution of the sensible designates the hierarchical ordering which determines those citizens who are able to participate in the governing of collective citizenry, and those which will constitute “the part that has no part.”

Rancière argues that practitioners working from within those practices that have historically gone by the name *politics* and *political philosophy* have considered themselves to be superior, inasmuch as they had the ability to contemplate complex and abstract political theories, and therefore came to consider themselves as better able than the non-professional at making decisions about the best way for that non-professional to live in a community. Rancière designates this form of politics as archi-politics.<sup>5</sup> The first explicit formulation of archi-politics traces back to Plato’s Republic in which the sensible is distributed in such a way that manual laborers were excluded from participating in the affairs of the republic, since the philosopher is the only person that is able to truly recognize what is good. In relation to Rancière’s technical usage of the term *politics*, Plato’s archi-politics represents political philosophy’s original miscount. At the very moment when political philosophy was born it

<sup>2</sup> FOUCAULT, Michel. "The Political Technology of Individuals." In: Power (The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Volume 3). Ed. James D. Faubion. New York: The New Press, 2000. p. 410.

<sup>3</sup> FOUCAULT, Michel. "The Political Technology of Individuals." In: Power (The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Volume 3). Ed. James D. Faubion. New York: The New Press, 2000. p. 412. Foucault does not cite this.

<sup>4</sup> RANCIERE, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. New York: Continuum, 2004. p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> RANCIERE, Jacques. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. p. 68.

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articulated a “freedom that that is not proper to the demos at all.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, intentional inequalities were etched into the foundation of political philosophy in the name of equality, under the methodology of a lie.

The second archetypal form of political philosophy is named para-politics. In this form of politics, the sensible is redistributed “into forms of rationality of the good government that achieves the telos of the community in the distribution of powers and their modes of visibility.”<sup>7</sup> This form of political rationality claims to be a politics *of a demos* who happen to be unable to directly take part in the government since the constraints of labor force them to remain in the fields during the day while the wealthy go to work as government officials. It was Aristotle who developed this theory of politics, when he claims both that it would be better if the most virtuous were to rule over the city “where all are by nature equal”<sup>8</sup>, and “it is *just* that all share in ruling and that this equal share manifest itself in a specific ‘imitation’: the alteration between the place of the ruler and the place to the ruled.”<sup>9</sup> An absence is therefore present in the relationship of the demos to the government, namely the *actual* sovereignty which remains all the while in the hands of the wealthy. Para-politics creates the same miscount as archi-politics, but becomes aware of the problems created by the reality of equality, and, through a series of rhetorical shifts, seek to pacify the miscounted by telling them that the *real* political power is in their hands, so that the wealthy citizens can conduct their business uninterrupted. The paradox of this rationality is clear: it is the awareness of the reality of equality that is the motivating force for newer and more complex practices of inequality. Gabriel Rockhill puts it well when he paraphrases Rancière by stating that “para-politics is the result of Aristotle’s attempt to square the circle by integrating the egalitarian anarchy of the demos into the constitutional order of the police...this masks the fact that the equality of the demos can never be adequately accounted for within the police order.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> RANCIERE, Jaques . *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press , 1995. p. 68 and p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> RANCIERE, Jaques . *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press , 1995. p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> RANCIERE, Jaques . *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press , 1995. Chapter. 4. footnote. 4.

<sup>9</sup> RANCIERE, Jaques . *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press , 1995. p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> RANCIERE, Jacques . *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. New York: Continuum, 2004. p. 88.

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The third and final form of policing that Rancière discusses in *Disagreement* is called meta-politics. Rockhill defines Rancière's notion of meta-politics by stating that it "emerges out of Marx's critique of the distance separating the dubious pretences of rights and representation from the hard truth of social reality. It thereby oscillates between two extremes: the condemnation of the ideological illusions of para-politics and the appeal of the communal incarnation of social truth that is strictly homogenous with archi-politics."<sup>11</sup> Meta-politics therefore interprets a democratic gap at the heart of the social body, and in so doing brings to light various political lies. In its exposition of political lies, meta-politics sees "class" as the fundamental cause of injustice. However, the truth of the political lie that meta-politics discovers implicitly legitimizes a distinction that divides the social body, therein committing a wrong. To put it in other words, meta-politics sees inequality as the essence of politics, whereas for Rancière politics names the disruptive force which tears through the inequalities which are legitimized by policing, in order to expose a *fundamental* equality.

### 3.

The essence of the three abovementioned archetypal forms of policing is summed up nicely on page eighteen of *Disagreement* where Rancière states: "From Athens in the fifth century B.C. up until our own governments, the party of the rich has only ever said one thing, which is most precisely the negation of politics: there is a part that has no part."<sup>12</sup> Rancière therefore defines the term politics negatively, denoting the moment when there is no part of those who have no part; or to say it positively, when the tangible order is disrupted. In this formulation of "the political" I hear certain echoes of Michel Foucault's thought. For this reason, it will hopefully be helpful to pause for a moment in order to consider a few similarities and differences between the works of these two thinkers.

Experience itself, according to both Rancière and Foucault, is political. That is to say, seeing, speaking, thinking, saying, being, etc., are affected by certain technologies of power working through history. In each of his major works Foucault shows that forms of subjectivity (the subject of sexuality, madness, health, etc.) are contingent to certain

<sup>11</sup>RANCIERE, Jacques . *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. New York: Continuum, 2004. p. 87-88.

<sup>12</sup>RANCIERE, Jaques . *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press , 1995. p. 14.

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technologies of power playing out in history, and not correlative with some inner essence of being human. Embedded within each of these historically constructed subjectivities are certain determinations of right and wrong, normal and abnormal, sayable and not-sayable. The totalizing effects of these modes of power are part of the “distribution of the sensible.” This distribution refers to “the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are described...thus producing a system of self evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made or done.”<sup>13</sup> In its self-evident factuality, this distribution of the sensible provides a rationality which legitimizes certain social hierarchies. The conceptual categorization of others as unable to make the correct choices about how to best to live their own lives is at the very heart Foucault’s notion of subjectivity and Rancière’s notion of Political Philosophy.

Thus, both thinkers see the historical constitution of subjectivity to be in a paradoxical relationship with certain positive articulations of subjectivity which have their origins in the enlightenment. But to interpret these thinkers as arguing that human beings are hopelessly dominated and subjectified by cultural forms of power would be a misreading. In order to show this to be the case, I would like to reflect for a moment on the function of the notion of equality in Rancière’s work. On the surface, Rancière’s use of this word seems odd, since he seems to be elevating its meaning to the status of an essence. But if the notion of equality does not originate in the various historical developments that have gone by the name of politics, or if it is not some transcendental ideal located in some heaven that is to be decoded through the use of reason, then one might well wonder about the origin of this notion. On this point, Todd May suggests that “To hold this assumption about human beings is not to ascribe to them a deep essence...It is simply to assume that people are capable of political action on their own behalf.”<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein Jean-Phillipe Deranty at the beginning of his essay *Rancière and Contemporary Political Ontology* states:

A striking feature of Jacques Rancière's *oeuvre* is its strong unity. The many books he has written, covering a wide array of topics, make up one coherent

<sup>13</sup> RANCIERE, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. New York: Continuum, 2004. p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> MAY, Todd . "Jacques Ranciere and the Ethics of Equality." *SubStance* 36.2 (2007). p. 9.

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conceptual world. This coherence stems from a fundamental intuition, of which all his books are the sophisticated exploration, in all its consequences and contradictions: the idea that equality is not an essence, a value or a goal, but the first presupposition from which theory must start.<sup>15</sup>

Rancière himself says as much in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* when he claims that “Our problem isn’t proving that all intelligence is equal. It is seeing what can be done under that presupposition. And for this, it’s enough that the opinion be possible – that is, that no opposing truth be proved.”<sup>16</sup> This presupposition plays a pragmatic role in an attempt to delegitimize the gravitational order of the distribution of the sensible, so as to *include* those who were once considered to be illegitimate voices. In this sense, new forms of political subjectivity are formed when a tear in the fabric of the police order is exposed. Todd May points out that “The main goal of this form of politics is to create a subject where there was none before.”<sup>17</sup> The subjectivity here is not originary. Rather, this subject emerges in both the active deconstruction of certain modes of power and the exercise other modes of power. Deconstruction occurs in Rancière’s text when the presupposition of equality meets with the logic of the police order, resulting in the undoing of the meaning-giving classifications which actively define human beings, their activities, and their share in the community.

#### 4.

This presupposition in Rancière’s thinking does not ask us to view equality as what is most essential and fundamental to human beings in an ontological sense. If equality were already manifest in being human, there would be no need to presuppose it. Rancière’s wants to point out the contradictory nature of the police “logic” that has carved out and legitimized certain hierarchical structures in society. When we presuppose equality, the goal is to bring to light various *wrongs* committed by this police-logic, and remove them from our thinking, so as to reconfigure and democratize our experience of the world. The presupposition of equality therefore seeks the true meaning of democracy: integrating those members of the *demos* who constituted the part of those who have no part back into the *polis*. Although the notion of equality in Rancière’s writing is radical, I will argue that it might not be radical

<sup>15</sup> DERANTY, J. P. "Ranciere and Contemporary Political Ontology." *Theory & Event* 6.4 (2003). p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> HEIDEGGER, Martin. *Holderin's Hymn 'Der Ister'*. Trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996. p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> MAY, Todd . "Jacques Rancier and the Ethics of Equality." *SubStance* 36.2 (2007). p. 30.

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enough to account for injustices that are committed by the demos in its dwelling in “the midst of beings as a whole.”<sup>18</sup> In order to make this claim it will be helpful to reflect on certain passages in Heidegger’s lecture course entitled *Hölderin’s Hymn “The Ister”* along with his *Letter on Humanism*.

In second part of his lecture course on *Hölderin’s Hymn “The Ister,”* Heidegger discusses the meaning of the Greek word *polis* in the context of his reading of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. After arguing that one should be careful not to interpret the word *polis* in a political sense by defining it as a state, Heidegger claims that we should understand it as signifying “the site of the abode, that is, this site of being homely in the midst of beings as a whole.”<sup>19</sup> The site of the abode signifies both a locality and a journeying. Here Heidegger interprets the poem “*Der Ister*” by stating that “The river is at once a locality and journeying in a concealed and originary unity. Such originary unity is different from the kind of unity that comes afterwards, merely unifying whatever is already present at hand by bringing things together. By contrast, originary unity first lets that which is unitary spring forth, yet without springing free from the ground of this unity.”<sup>20</sup> In this sense the *polis*, therefore, is the “site of being homely in the midst of being as a whole.” I think that Jean Luc Nancy, in his continuation of this thought, calls this site of “being homely in this midst of beings as a whole” a “being-with.” Nancy claims:

[With] implies proximity and distance, precisely the distance of the impossibility to come together in a common being. That is for me the core of the question of community; community doesn’t have a common being, a common substance, but consists in being-in-common, from the starting point it’s a sharing, but sharing what? Sharing nothing, sharing the space between. “With” is in certain ways always between, or implies an in-between<sup>21</sup>.

The *polis*, therefore, is the site of dwelling where the common-being is missing. Although the common being of the *polis*, according to humanist thinking, is located in the dignity of human beings, Heidegger will reject this possibility, and in doing so he shows how humanism belongs to a tradition which forgot that human beings dwell in the midst of beings

<sup>18</sup> HEIDEGGER, Martin. *Holderin’s Hymn ‘Der Ister’*. Trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996. p. 82.

<sup>19</sup> HEIDEGGER, Martin. *Holderin’s Hymn ‘Der Ister’*. Trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996. p. 82..

<sup>20</sup> HEIDEGGER, Martin. *Holderin’s Hymn ‘Der Ister’*. Trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996. p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> NANCY, Jean-Luc. "Love and Community: A Roundtable Discussion with Nancy". Aug. 2001. European Graduate School. 5 Apr. 2008 <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/nancy/nancy-roundtable-discussion2001.html>>.

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as a whole. This forgetting occurs in the various traditions of humanism which operate under the problematic opposition between subject and object. This subject/object distinction is problematic in that it tends to prioritize subjectivity in relation to its objects, demarcating the subject as an authority over objects. At the heart of this traditional metaphysical notion of subjectivity is a system of inclusion and exclusion which legitimizes the manipulation and exploitation of whatever falls in the category of “object.” In his abandoning of the subject/object distinction, Heidegger deconstructs the metaphysical notion of subjectivity which is implicated in humanist thinking. In doing so, he also re-examines the technological modes by which human beings come to perceive and enframe objects. Until we abandon these technological modes of perceiving and engaging with Being, in order to be at home in the midst of beings, we will continue to relate to beings in the world improperly.

The ethics, which emerges from Heidegger’s destruction of the metaphysics of subjectivity, overlaps in important ways with the thought of Rancière. The deconstruction of the subject/object distinction parallels Rancière’s deconstruction of political subjectivities where certain members have the knowledge and expertise to speak for other people, and certain other members are objects to be governed. Therefore, at the heart of both Rancière and Heidegger’s critiques of subjectivity is the impulse to rethink what it means to be a subject, and to call into question certain modes of subjectivity. The realization that being-with is at the heart of being-in-the-world is, to a certain extent, a commonality between Heidegger and Rancière. Each thinker is showing that the “subject” of being-in-the-world is shown to exist in more complex interrelatedness with the world.

However, in Rancière’s depiction of a positive political subjectivity based on disagreement, I sense undertones of the subject/object distinction that Heidegger would want to abandon. In *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger claims that “the “proper dignity” can only be discovered if man is thought of... in his fundamental relationship to Being and its meaning and truth.”<sup>22</sup> This relationship to Being is not merely the relationship of some human-beings to other human-beings, but rather, it is the relationship between human beings and their “being in the midst of beings.” For this reason, the dignity of man cannot be discovered by merely attempting to integrate those members of the *demos* that constitute the part of those who have no part, back into the *polis*, where the *polis* is understood to be merely the sum of

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the *demos*. Rather, “the key to a thinking of man that befits his dignity lies with the possibility of rethinking – or thinking for the first time – the relationship of man and Being.”<sup>23</sup> This parallels Heidegger’s discussion of the *polis* in *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”* where he claims “perhaps the *polis* is that realm and locale around which everything question-worthy and uncanny turns in an exceptional sense”<sup>24</sup> By defining the origin of politics as the capacity to speak and disagree, Rancière has limited what is proper to the meaning of the *polis* to only include members of the *demos*. But if the *polis* is the site of being-with, then it has to be more than a sharing of space between some political subjects and some other political subjects.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, I tried first to show that a certain commonality exists between the works of Foucault and Rancière in regard to the creation of new modes of political subjectivity. For each of these thinkers the subject that emerges as a product of their respective deconstructive methodologies is not essential or originary. But the deconstruction of these new forms of subjectivity has an ethical dimension that guides us in appropriating a newly revised dignity to human beings. This appropriation makes use of the notion of subjectivity. Reading Heidegger, I tried to show that using this notion of subjectivity in an attempt to articulate an ethics could be problematic. If the subject/object distinction is working in the background of Foucault and Rancière’s thinking, then their thinking might not yet have discovered the proper dignity of human beings. There is no doubt, however, that these thinkers have each left us with valuable tools for our own calling into question of the meaning of *polis*.

<sup>22</sup> HEIDEGGER, Martin. *Holderlin's Hymn 'Der Ister'*. Trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996. p. 233.

<sup>23</sup> LIVINGSTON, Paul. "Martin Heidegger: 'The Letter on Humanism'". 2005. 14 Dec. 2007.

<[http://www07.homepage.villanova.edu/paul.livingston/martin\\_heidegger%20%20letter%20on%20humanism.htm](http://www07.homepage.villanova.edu/paul.livingston/martin_heidegger%20%20letter%20on%20humanism.htm)>.

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<sup>24</sup> HEIDEGGER, Martin. *Holderin's Hymn 'Der Ister'*. Trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996. p. 81.

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