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Introducing disagreement Jacques Rancière

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I am not a “political philosopher.” I do not believe generally in the “divisions” of philosophy. Nor do I believe in localising philosophy within some division of knowledges and discourses. For me, philosophy consists of singular nodes of thought which are opened by undoing the established divisions between disciplines. Indeed, against these divisions, I have continued to wander into literature, social history, politics, and aesthetics. And I have continued to do so because of problems and objects of thought thrown up by “non-philosophical” events.

So, in the wake of '68 and the thwarting of the hoped-for union of students' and workers' movements, I set out to reconsider the history of relations between workers' movements and utopias or theories of social transformation. I tried to understand the history of workers' emancipation from its beginning, to show its originary complexity, and the complexity of its relations with those utopias and theories.

Later, in response to developments in the 1990s, I tried to elaborate a theoretical framework for a new reflection on politics. The situation in the 1990s was one of surprises, surprises which required a rethinking of the notion of democracy and, indeed, the idea of politics itself.

In the first instance, the collapse of the Soviet system had an effect *à double détente*. It seemed to spell the death of the old opposition between formal and real democracy and, therefore, to herald the triumph of the values of so-called formal democracy. That is, it seemed to allow the values of democratic debate to be identified with those of the liberal economy and the state of right. We then experienced a flourish of assertions of the return of politics in different forms: some, following Leo Strauss, celebrated the return to the original values of politics,

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understood as the search for the common good; others rediscovered the Arendtian vision, opposing political action to the empire of social necessity; still others put forward the Rawlsian theory of justice as equity and the Habermasian conception of communicative action as models of democracy.

What the collapse of the Soviet system soon betrayed, however, was an internal weakening of the very democracy that was assumed to have triumphed. For the moment, I am not speaking of problems in the former communist countries. The identification of formal democracy with the liberal economy in fact manifested itself more and more in the so-called democratic regimes. It appeared as the internal exhaustion of democratic debate. The end of the socialist alterna-

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tive, then, did not signify any renewal of democratic debate. Instead, it signified the reduction of democratic life to the management of the local consequences of global economic necessity. The latter, in fact, was posited as a common condition which imposed the same solutions on both left and right. Consensus around these solutions became the supreme democratic value.

What thus accompanied the routing of Marxist regimes was the triumph of a certain Marxism, one which turned political forms into instruments of economic interests and necessities. At the same time, theories of the “return of politics,” the common good, etc. became ideal justifications of the consensual order. Assertions of the primacy of the political over the “social” could be heard everywhere. What these assertions served to do in reality, however, was to stigmatise the social movements fighting against the identification of democracy with the state administration of economic necessity.² The apparent return of politics was, in fact, its liquidation. That liquidation in turn required nothing less than a rethinking of the following questions. What is the specificity of democracy? What is the specificity of politics as a form of common action? And what does this “common” consist of?

This reflection became all the more necessary as the triumph of consensual democracy brought with it some strange counter-effects. “Consensus” was presented as the pacification of conflicts that arose from ideologies of social struggle, and yet it brought about anything but peace. Not only have a number of states liberated from the Soviet system fallen prey to ethnic and religious conflicts – occasionally in radical forms – but a number of consensual-democratic states have also witnessed the re-emergence and success of racist and xenophobic movements.

At the time, these new forms of violence disturbing the consensual idyll were seen in two ways. First, they were thought from within the logic of consensus. That is, they were understood as exceptions to the consensus and, as exceptions, they were presented as remnants of the past or temporary regressions. The success of the extreme right in France and then in other European countries was accordingly explained

away as the reaction of social strata threatened by modernisation.

My thinking took the reverse tack: these phenomena had to be thought not as exceptions to but as consequences of the logic of consensus. They had to be thought as effects not of economic and sociological causes but of the erasure of democracy and politics constitutive of the logic of consensus. Politics, in other words, had to be thought as something denied by identity politics, because it had already been denied by the logic of consensus. Politics had also to be thought as something radically heterogeneous to the tradition of political philosophy. That is what determined the re-reading of the political-philosophical tradition I undertook in *Disagreement*.

This tradition considers politics to be the result of an anthropological invariant. The invariant may be the fear that compels individuals to unite. Or it may be the possession of language that permits discussion. In the return to political philosophy much has been made of this linguistic power of the human animal, with reference either to the Aristotelian definition of man as an animal endowed with logos or to the pragmatics of language found in Habermas. In both cases, the definition of political citizenship seems to follow logically from the definition of the human animal as an animal endowed with language. Aristotle says in essence: man is a political animal – he can be recognised by his possession of logos, which is what enables him to discuss the just and the unjust, while animals have a voice only to express pleasure and pain (*Politics* 1253a). Elsewhere he adds that a citizen is one who participates in the fact of governing and being governed. Deducing the second proposition from the first is apparently simple, as is founding the reciprocity that characterises politics and democracy in general on the shared human privilege of language. In the same way, Habermas shows that entering into an interlocutory relation in order to defend certain interests or values requires submitting assertions to objective criteria of validity, on pain of performative contradiction. It seems that the fact of giving one’s word to be understood implies an imma-

ment telos of inter-comprehension as the basis of rational community.

There is, of course, no evidence for this kind of conclusion. Indeed, immediately after positing the essence of the political animal, Aristotle makes a distinction between those who possess language and those, like slaves, who can only understand it. This is because the possession of language is not a physical capacity. It is a symbolic division, that is, a symbolic determination of the relation between the order of speech and that of bodies – which is why the very distinction between human speech and an animal's voice is problematic. Traditionally, it had been enough not to hear what came out of the mouths of the majority of human beings – slaves, women, workers, colonised peoples, etc. – as language, and instead to hear only cries of hunger, rage, or hysteria, in order to deny them the quality of being political animals. It was in just such terms around 1830 that the French thinker Ballanche rewrote the apologia of the plebeian secession on the Aventine Hill in ancient Rome. The conflict was, above all, one over what it was to speak. Plebeians, gathered on the Aventine Hill, demanded a treaty with the patricians. The patricians responded that this was impossible, because to make a treaty meant giving one's word: since the plebeians did not have human speech, they could not give what they did not have. They possessed only a "sort of bellowing which was a sign of need and not a manifestation of intelligence." In order to understand what the plebeians said, then, it had first to be admitted that they spoke. And this required a novel perceptual universe, one where – contrary to all perceptible evidence – those who worked for a living had affairs in common with free men and a voice to designate and argue these common affairs.

This is what "disagreement [*mésentente*]" means. It cannot be deduced from the anthropological fact of language. Nothing can be deduced from some anthropological property common to humanity in general, because the "common" is always contested at the most immediate level: the fact of living in the same world, with the same senses [*sens*], and the same powers of holding something in common. Deducing the

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existence of a common political world from the comprehension of language can never be natural when that world presupposes a quarrel over what is common. *Mésentente* – a term untranslatable into English – indicates this node in between two things. It means both "the fact of not hearing, of not understanding" and "quarrel, disagreement." Combining both meanings yields only this: the fact of hearing and understanding language does not in itself produce any of the effects of an egalitarian community. Egalitarian effects occur only through a forcing, that is, the instituting of a quarrel that challenges the incorporated, perceptible evidence of an inegalitarian logic. This quarrel is politics.

Indeed, that is what is implied by the word "democracy." The name needs to retain all its polemical force. It was invented not by democrats as a rallying cry but by their adversaries as a term of abuse. Democracy meant the power of the people with nothing, the speech of those who should not be speaking, those who were not really speaking beings. The first significant occurrences of the term "demos" are to be found in Homer and always appear in speech situations. Greek and Trojan leaders alike denounced the same scandal: that men of the demos – men who were part of the indistinct collection of people "beyond count" – took the liberty of speaking.

The word "demos" does not designate the poor or suffering part of the population. Properly it designates those who are outside the count, those who can assert no particular title over common affairs. In *The Laws*, Plato enumerates all the titles – age, birth, virtue, knowledge, strength, etc. – to exercising power, titles which give some the right to govern others – who are, conversely, young, of low birth, ignorant, etc. Right at the end of the list, though, is a title which is not one: God's part, as he ironically puts it, that is, the lot of fate, chance, or, simply, democracy.

Democracy, then, is the specific power of those who have no common title to exercise power, except that of not being entitled to its exercise. Democracy is the disrupting of all logics that purport to found domination on some entitlement to dominate. There are many such

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logics, but through various mediations they can be reduced to two: those of birth and wealth. By contrast, the power of those without title is the accident that interrupts the play of these logics, and with it the dominant movement that leads from the archaic power of birth to the modern power of wealth. It is this accident which allows politics as such to exist. Politics is not the general art of governing human assemblies by virtue of some principle inherent in the definition of a human being. It is the accident that interrupts the logic by which those who have a title to govern dominate – a title confirmed only by the fact that they do dominate. Human government is not the putting into practice of some “political virtue” native to the human animal. Instead, all that exists are the contingency of domination founded on itself and the contingency of equality which suspends it.

Between the general human capacity for speech and the definition of “citizenship” as the capacity to govern and be governed lies “disagreement,” which opens the sphere of politics as a suspension of all logics that would ground domination in some specific virtue. Here lies the power of the demos, understood as the collection of those with no title to dominate or be dominated. Democracy, in this sense, is not one political regime within a classification of different forms of government. Nor is it a form of social life, as the Tocquevillian tradition would have it. Rather, democracy is the institution of politics itself as the aberrant form of government.

The term “demos,” as the very subject of politics, sums up the aberrant, anarchic nature of politics. The demos is not the real totality or ideal totalisation of a human collectivity. Neither is it the masses as opposed to the elite. The demos is, instead, an abstract separation of a population from itself. It is a supplementary part over and above the sum of a population’s parts. Political subjects are, thus, not representatives of parts of the population but processes of subjectivation which introduce a disagreement, a dissensus. And political dissensus is not simply a conflict of interests, opinions, or values. It is a conflict over the common itself. It is not a quarrel over which solutions to apply to a situ-

ation but a dispute over the situation itself, a dispute over what is visible as an element of a situation, over which visible elements belong to what is common, over the capacity of subjects to designate this common and argue for it. Political dissensus is the division of perceptible givens themselves.

This presupposes the introduction of a dividing line in what is generally designated as the political sphere. Politics is not primarily the exercise of power or the deciding of common affairs. Every decision on common affairs requires the prior existence of the common, that is, a form of symbolising the common. There are two broad forms of this symbolisation of the common. The first symbolises the community as an ensemble of well-defined parts, places and functions, and of the properties and capabilities linked to them, all of which presupposes a fixed distribution of things into common and private – a distinction which itself depends on an ordered distribution of the visible and the invisible, noise and speech, etc. This type of distribution can take on more or less archaic or modern forms. It stretches from the patricians’ not hearing the plebeians speak to modern statistics, where opinions are distributed as functions of parts of the population, such as socio-economic or age groups. Archaic or modern, the way of counting parts, places, and functions remains the same. This way of counting simultaneously defines the ways of being, doing, and saying appropriate to these places. I call this form of symbolising the common, that is, the principle of distribution and completeness that leaves no space for a supplement, the police [*police*].

And I reserve the name of politics [*politique*] for another, second form of symbolising the common, one which calls into question the divisions of common and private, visible and invisible, audible and inaudible. This calling into question presupposes the action of supplementary subjects, subjects that are not reducible to social groups or identities but are, rather, collectives of enunciation and demonstration surplus to the count of social groups. The young Marx in a famous formula speaks of the proletariat as a “social class which is not a social class but the dissolution of all classes.” I’ve twisted this

phrase from the meaning Marx gave it to turn it into a definition of political subjects in general, since, even when they bear the same name as social groups, political subjects are supernumerary collectives which call into question the counting of the community's parts and the relations of inclusion and exclusion which define that count. Thus, "workers" or "proletarians" were subjects who instituted a quarrel over the character (private or common?) of the world of work. Their actions brought a universe previously thought of as domestic into public visibility. It made the inhabitants of that world visible as beings belonging to the same (public) world to which others belonged, that is, as beings capable of common speech and thought. Such a demonstration could occur only in the form of a dissensus, as was the case at another moment with the demonstration of women's capabilities. On each occasion, what mattered was challenging the accepted perceptible givens, and transforming one world into another. What we have here, though, is not merely the historical form of the excluded group's entry into public view. All political action presupposes the refutation of a situation's given assumptions, the introduction of previously uncounted objects and subjects.

This is why a vicious circle emerges in the opposition between the political and the social as maintained by a certain reading (Strauss, Arendt) of ancient philosophy. This tradition seeks to purify politics from the impingements of the social, but the effect of this purification is to reduce politics to the state, and thereby reserve politics for those with a "title" to exercise it. Politics, however, consists of calling the social/political, private/public divide into question. Habermas's pragmatic logic contains the same kind of vicious circle. "Performative contradiction" only functions if a speech situation with its partners and rules already constituted is assumed. Political interlocution, though, is deployed precisely in situations where no prior scenario to regulate the objects or partners of the common exists. In politics, subjects act to create a stage on which problems can be made visible – a scene with subjects and objects, in full view of a "partner" who does not "see" them.

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This means that politics is not a permanent given of human societies. There are always forms of power, but that does not mean that there is always politics. Politics occurs only when political subjects initiate a quarrel over the perceptible givens of common life. This difference is always precarious, as political subjects are operations [*dispositifs*] of enunciation supernumerary to the parts of society or collective identities. They are always on the verge of disappearing, either through simply fading away or, more often than not, through their re-incorporation, their identification with social groups or imaginary bodies: "workers" and "proletarians" were once exemplary subjects, before their incorporation as a part of society or the glorious body of a new community.

The identification of democracy with consensus is the current form of this evanescence. Consensus does not mean simply the erasure of conflicts for the benefit of common interests. Consensus means erasing the contestatory, conflictual nature of the very givens of common life. It reduces political difference to police-like homogeneity. Consensus knows only: real parts of the community, problems around the redistribution of powers and wealth among these parts, expert calculations over the possible forms of such redistribution, and negotiations between the representatives of these various parts. In other words, the consensual state props itself up on global economic necessity presented as an intangible given, in order to transform conflicts over what is common into the internal problems of a community. All of which assumes that a whole objectivation of the problems and parts of the community is possible. Consensus, then, is actually the modern form of reducing politics to the police. And the philosophies of the return of the political and the return to politics are the ideological coronation of this effective depoliticisation.

From here it is possible to understand how consensus is able to engender new forms of identitarian passion. The core of consensus lies in suppressing supernumerary political subjects, the people surplus to the breaking down of the population into parts, the subjectivations of class conflict superimposed onto conflicts of interest

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between parts of the population. At the core of consensus is the dream of an administration of affairs in which all forms of symbolising the common, and thus all conflicts over that symbolisation, have been liquidated as ideological spectres.

Of course, there is no such thing as the simple management of common interests or the zero symbolisation of the community. Whenever the paradoxical power of those without title vanishes, there remains the conflict between the two great titles, the powers of wealth and birth. Whenever the people *en trop* of democracy disappears, another people appears: namely, the corps of those with the same blood, ancestors, or identity. And whenever the worker or proletarian disappears as a figure of political alterity, the migrant remains as a naked, unsymbolisable figure of the other. This other can no longer be counted, even in the name of the uncounted. It can only appear as that which is to be excluded, visibly in excess of any relation to the community. On the one hand, identitarian extremism carries the consensual logic of suppressing surplus subjects to its logical conclusion; and, on the other, it presents itself as the sole alternative to consensus, the only force to refuse the law of economic or sociological necessity and thus reinstate alternative and conflict. In effect, identitarian extremism restages the archaic power of birth as the only alternative exactly when democracy is reduced in the name of consensus to the simple power of wealth.

The concepts offered in *Disagreement* attempt to provide tools for thinking through the singular historical situation of the eclipse of politics. They seek to draw reflections on our situation away from those grand narratives and prophecies of the “end” which work to transform the eclipse of politics into some final realisation of a great historical destiny. These teleologies take several forms. First, there is the vision of the “end of utopias,” the celebration of the return of reasonable politics. In reality, however, this reasonable politics is nothing but the disappearance of politics in favour of management. Second, there is the sociological vision of the end of politics which identifies democracy in its terminal state with the self-management or

peaceful interaction of the interests and affects pertaining to the “democratic mass individual.” Democracy, though, is not a state of the social, it is a division of society. And the people of politics never disappears into some simple coexistence of individuals and social groups without remainder, it is always replaced by another people. Finally, there is the thematic of the “end of history,” understood as the end of the era of conflicts and the passage into a post-historical, pacified world. All this while in our world double the number of conflicts and massacres is conducted in the name of God or race. Ours is a world dominated by a power that can only pacify conflicts – here and there – through recourse to an armed violence identified with the battle without limits of God or of good against infinite evil. Some find the archaic, ethico-religious rhetoric used by George W. Bush amusing. Others see in it the height of cynicism. I don’t think it is either. What we have here is simply the extreme limit of the logic of consensus, that is, the dissolution of all political differences and juridical distinctions into the indistinct and totalising domain of ethics.

I have no pretensions to offering remedies to the various forms of this eclipse of politics. It does seem at least possible, however, to identify these forms. And it seems necessary to distinguish such research from prophecies of catastrophe. Against thoughts of the end and catastrophe, I believe it is possible and necessary to oppose a thought of political precariousness. Politics is not some age of humanity which is to have been realised today. Politics is a local, precarious, contingent activity – an activity which is always on the point of disappearing, and thus perhaps also on the point of reappearing.



notes

1 This paper was delivered by Jacques Rancière at the Institut Français, Berlin, 4 June 2003. It addresses the reasons why he was prompted to reconsider the tradition of political philosophy and its thinking of politics in his book *La Mésen-*

tente: *Politique et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), translated by Julie Rose as *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999). I would like to thank my reader at Angelaki, Forbes Morlock, for his extensive suggestions and comments on two earlier drafts of this translation. I would also like to thank Gene Ray and Jasmin Mersmann for their comments on an earlier draft of this translation. [Translator's note.]

2 For example, the massive strikes in the winter of 1995 in France against plans by the Juppé government to move France's social security and health system closer to an American-style system were condemned by the usual figures who constitute the service intelligentsia as being out of step with the rigours of "economic imperatives." Many of these "unsentimental" intellectuals, having willingly shed all their radical positions and become cognisant of economic activity, openly supported this government's "fundamental reform" in a letter to *Le Monde*. The popular mass uprisings were denounced as "archaic," "corporatist," "classist," in sum, no more than a tide of egalitarian nostalgia holding back the progress of modern, consensual, democratic France. On this point see Kristin Ross's *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002) 208–15. [Translator's note.]

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