The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics

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What does it mean to think politics and aesthetics under the concept of dissensus?[1] Obviously dissensus is not only the concept of what politics and aesthetics are about. This notion also sets up the theoretical stage on which politics and aesthetics themselves are thinkable and the kind of relations that tie their objects together. At the most abstract level, dissensus means a difference between sense and sense: a difference within the same, a sameness of the opposite. If you assume that politics is a form of dissensus, this means that you cannot deduce it from any essence of the community, whether you do it positively in terms of implementation of a common property such as communicative language (Aristotle) or negatively in terms of a response to a destructive instinct that would set man against man (Hobbes). There is politics because the common is divided. Now this division is not a difference of levels. The opposition between sense and sense is not an opposition between the sensible and the intelligible. Political dissensus is not the appearance or the form that would be the manifestation of an underlying social and economic process. In reference to the Marxist conceptualization, class war is the actual reality of politics, not its hidden cause.

Let us start from the first point. In *Disagreement* I re-examined the old Aristotelian definition of the political animal as a speaking animal. Some critics saw it as 'a return to the classics', which also meant to them a return to an old view of language and an old theory of the subject that would ignore Derrida's deconstruction or Lyotard's *différend*. But this view is misleading. Starting from the Aristotelian 'speaking animal' does not mean

returning to the definition of an anthropological disposition to political life, to the idea that politics is based on the human capacity of speaking and discussing, as Aristotle opposed it to the merely animal capacity of the voice which expresses pleasure and pain. On the contrary, I show that this 'common' capacity is split up from the very beginning. Aristotle tells us that slaves *understand* language but don't *possess* it. This is what dissensus means. There is politics because speaking is not the same as speaking, because there is not even an agreement on what a sense means. Political dissensus is not a discussion between speaking people who would confront their interests and values. It is a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as an argument on justice. And this is also what 'class war' means: not the conflict between groups which have opposite economic interests, but the conflict about what an 'interest' is, the struggle between those who set themselves as able to manage social interests and those who are supposed to be only able to reproduce their life.

I started from philosophers who defined politics as the implementation of a human disposition to the community because I wanted to show that it is impossible to draw such a deduction, that this 'common' sensory quality is already the stage of a dissensus. This leads me to a methodological remark: disagreement is not only an object of my theorization. It is also its method. Addressing an author or a concept first means to me setting the stage for a disagreement, testing an operator of difference. This also means that my theoretical operations are always aimed at reframing the configuration of a problem. The same critics that suspect me of 'returning' to the classics think that the distinction between politics and police in *Disagreement* or in the 'Ten Theses on Politics' amounts to a search for the purity of politics. Marxists see it as a reminder of the old 'populist' opposition of spontaneity to organization, deconstructionists as an uncritical return to an old metaphysics of identity. But both miss the polemical context of my argumentation. My analysis of what 'politics' means was entirely aimed at challenging and overturning a given idea of that purity. It was a response to the so-called return of the political or return to politics which nearly overwhelmed us in the 1980s in France. At that time we could hear everywhere this motto: we have now broken away from the subjection of the political to the social, to social interests, social conflicts and social utopias. We have thus returned to the true sense of politics as the action on the public stage, the manifestation of a 'being-together', the search for the

common good, and so on. The philosophical ground for that return was taken mainly from two philosophers, Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt, who – in some way – had brought the legacy of Greek philosophy to modern governmental practice. Both theorists had emphasized the opposition between the political sphere of public action and speech and the realm of economical and social necessity. Their arguments were strongly revived, even more so as they could be substituted for the old Marxist opposition of 'economism' and 'spontaneism' to true revolutionary practice.

That conjunction was made obvious during the strikes of 1995 in France. The old Marxist denunciation of 'trade-unionism' and the Arendtian denunciation of the confusion between the political and the social could merge into one and the same discourse of support to the 'political courage' of the government in charge of the common good and of the future of the community *against* the archaic privileges advocated by the strikers. Therefore, it appeared that the return to the 'purity' of the political meant in fact the return to the identification of the political with state institutions and governmental practice. Consequently, my attempt at defining the specificity of politics was first an attempt at challenging the mainstream idea of the return to pure politics.

There is no 'pure' politics. I wrote the 'Ten Theses on Politics' primarily as a critique of the Arendtian idea of a specific political sphere and a political way of life. The 'Theses' aimed at demonstrating that her definition of politics was a vicious circle: it identifies politics with a specific way of life. Ultimately, however, this means identifying it with the way of life of those whose way of life already destined them to politics. It is the circle of the *arkhê*, the anticipation of the exercise of power in the 'power of beginning', in the disposition or entitlement to exercise it. The core of the problem lay precisely in the idea of 'disposition' or 'destination'. It lay in the idea of the opposition between a political and a non-political life or a 'bare life'. This distribution is precisely the presupposition of what I call the police: the configuration of the political community as a collective body with its places and functions allotted according to the competences specific to groups and individuals. There is politics when this presupposition is broken by the affirmation that the power belongs to those who have no qualification to rule – which amounts to saying that there is no ground whatever for the exercise of power. There is politics when the boundary separating those who are born for politics from those who are born for the 'bare' life of economic and social necessity is put into question.

This means that there is no political life, but a political stage. Political action consists in showing as political what was viewed as 'social', 'economic' or 'domestic'. It consists in blurring the boundaries. It is what happens whenever 'domestic' agents – workers or women, for instance – reconfigure their quarrel as a quarrel concerning the common, that is, concerning what place belongs or does not belong to it and who is able or unable to make enunciations and demonstrations about the common. It should be clear therefore that there is politics when there is a disagreement about what is politics, when the boundary separating the political from the social or the public from the domestic is put into question. Politics is a way of re-partitioning the political from the non-political. This is why it generally occurs 'out of place', in a place which was not supposed to be political.

Let us draw some consequences from this analysis. First, this does not mean that my view of politics is 'value-neutral'.[2] Sure, it refuses to ground politics on an ethical idea of the common. More precisely, it puts into question the idea that politics, as a set of practices, has to be regulated by ethics conceived as the instance pronouncing values or principles of action in general. According to this view, disasters and horrors would happen when you forget to ground politics in ethics. I would put matters the other way around. In the age of George Bush and Osama bin Laden, it appears that the ethical conflict is much more violent, much more radical than the political one. Politics then can be conceived as a specific practice of antagonism, capable of soothing the violence of ethical conflict.

Yet I do not reduce politics to a mere agonistic schema where the 'content' is irrelevant. I am far away from the Schmittian formalization of antagonism. Politics, I argue, has its own universal, its own measure that is equality. The measure never applies directly. It does so only through the enactment of a wrong. However, not every wrong is necessarily political. It has been argued against my theses that there are also anti-democratic forms of protest among the oppressed, shaped by religious fanaticism or ethnic identitarianism and intolerance. Ernesto Laclau (2005) put this as the blind spot of my conceptualization of dissensus (246–7). But it is clear that in my view a wrong is political when it enacts the basis of political action, which is the mere contingency of equality, which is evidently not the case of 'popular' movements asking for the purity of the blood, the power of religion, and so on. But I also refuse a widespread tendency to stigmatize any form of protest under the name of 'populism'. The concept of 'populism' is a hotchpotch which allows old Marxists and young liberals

at once to put in the same basket struggles for maintaining the welfare system and ethnic or religious riots.

The 'people' is a name for two opposite things: demos or ethnos. The ethnos is the people identified with the living body of those who have the same origin, are born on the same soil or worship the same god. It is the people as a given body opposed to other such bodies. The demos is the people conceived as a supplement to the parts of the community – what I call the count of the uncounted. It is the inscription of the mere contingency of being born here or there, as opposed to any 'qualification' for ruling, and it makes its appearance through the process of verification of that equality, the construction of forms of dissensus. Now it is clear that the difference is not given once and for all. The life of the demos is the ongoing process of its differentiation from the ethnos.

Second, this does not mean that I reduce politics to exceptional and vanishing moments of uprising. The mere enactment of the political principle rarely – if ever – appears in its purity, but there is politics in a lot of 'confused' matters and conflicts, and politics makes for a memory, a history. There is a historical dynamic of politics: a history of events that break the 'normal' course of time, a history of events, inscriptions and forms of subjectivization, of promises, memories, repetitions, anticipations and anachronisms.[3] There is no point in opposing exception to process. The debate is about the conception of the process. The history of politics, as I view it, is not a continuous process, going along with economic and social development. It is not the unravelling of any 'destinary' plot either.

Thirdly, the opposition between politics and police goes along with the statement that politics has no 'proper' object, that all its objects are blended with the objects of police. In an earlier text, I proposed to give the name of 'the political' to the field of encounter – and 'confusion' – between the process of politics and the process of police (cf. Rancière 1995). It is clear for me that the possibilities for a political intervention reframing a situation have to be taken from a given setting of the political, understood in that way. This is why, against the Marxist opposition of real and formal democracy, I emphasized the part played by all the inscriptions of the democratic process in the texts of the constitutions, the institutions of the states, the apparatuses of public opinion, the mainstream forms of enunciation, etc. It is a point that clearly differentiates me from some radical political thinkers who want to tear the radicality of politics apart from any confusion with the play of state institutions. Alain Badiou, who merely sees

democracy as the form of state and way of life of our Western societies, suspects me of clinging to that consensual view. Slavoj Žižek opposes the risk of the 'radical political act' to the 'legalistic logic of transcendental guarantee' that is provided by the democratic law of the majority.[4] But I never identified the democratic process with the functioning of our states or with the 'opportunistic insurance' (Žižek) provided by the law of the majority. I identified it with the political supplementation that confronts this functioning with the 'power of anyone' which grounds it at the cost of disrupting it. The unequal order cannot work without its egalitarian presupposition. Conversely the egalitarian struggle itself often uses the weapons of the police description of the common. Let us think for instance to the role played in feminist struggle by the medical, moral and pedagogical standards of sexual complementarity, or by the reference to the 'property' of work in workers' struggles. Equality has no vocabulary or grammar of its own, only a poetics.

Politics does not stem from a place outside of the police. I agree on this point with some of my contradictors (cf. Thomson 2003). There is no place outside of the police. But there are conflicting ways of doing things with the 'places' that it allocates: of relocating, reshaping or redoubling them. As I recall in the 'Ten Theses', the space of democracy was opened in Greece by such a displacement, when demos, which first meant 'district', became the name of the subject of politics. We know that it did so when Cleisthenes reshaped the Athenian tribes by putting together three 'demes' that were geographically separated – a measure that made two things at once: it constituted the autonomy of the political space and deprived the aristocracy of its locally based power.

This gives me the opportunity to say something more about my use of spatial categories or metaphors that has been underlined by several commentators.[5] Speaking of the 'space' of democracy is not a mere metaphor. The delimitation of the demos is at once a material and a symbolical matter. More precisely it is a new form of (dis)connection between the material and the symbolical. The institution of democracy meant the invention of a new topography, the creation of a space made of disconnected places against the aristocratic space that connected the material privilege of the landowners with the symbolical power of the tradition. This disconnection is at the core of the opposition between politics and police. So the issue of space has to be thought of in terms of distribution: distribution of places, boundaries of what is in or out, central or peripheral, visible or invisible. It is related to what I call *the distribution of the sensible*

(see Rancière 2004b). By this I mean the way in which the abstract and arbitrary forms of symbolization of hierarchy are embodied as perceptive givens, in which a social destination is anticipated by the evidence of a perceptive universe, of a way of being, saying and seeing. This distribution is a certain framing of time and space. The 'spatial' closure of Plato's *Republic* which wants that anybody be at its *own place* is its temporal partition as well: the artisans are initially figured as they who have no time to be elsewhere than in their place. I called my book on worker's emancipation *The Night of the Proletarians* (translated into English as *The Nights of Labor* (1989)) to stress that the core of emancipation was an attempt to break away from the very partition of time sustaining social subjection: the obvious partition being that workers work during the day and sleep during the night. Therefore, the conquest of the night was the first step in social emancipation, the first material and symbolic basis for a reconfiguration of the given state of things. In order to state themselves as sharing in a common world and as able to name the objects and participants of that common world, they had to reconfigure their 'individual' life, to reconfigure the partition of day and night that, for all individuals, anticipated the partition between those who were or were not destined to care for the common. It was not a matter of 'representations' as historians would claim. It was a matter of sensory experience, a form of partition of the perceptible.

In other words, my concern with 'space' is the same as my concern with 'aesthetics'. I already tried to explain that the shift perceived by some commentators between my work on history and politics and my work on aesthetics is not a shift from one field to another. My work on politics was an attempt to show politics as an 'aesthetic affair'. What I mean by this term has nothing to do with the 'aestheticization of politics' that Benjamin opposed to the 'politicization of art'. What I mean is that politics, rather than the exercise of power or the struggle for power, is the configuration of a specific world, a specific form of experience in which some things appear to be political objects, some questions political issues or argumentations and some agents political subjects. I attempted to redefine this 'aesthetic' nature of politics by setting politics not as a specific single world but as a conflictive world: not a world of competing interests or values but a world of competing worlds.

If that part of my work dealt with the 'aesthetics of politics', I would say that my later work dealt with the politics of aesthetics. I do not understand by this term the question of the relationship between art and politics, but

rather, the meaning and import of the configuration of a specific sphere – the sphere of aesthetics – in the political distribution of the perceptible. Already in my 'political' work, I have tried to demonstrate how the existence of the political and the existence of the aesthetic are strongly interconnected: the exclusion of a public scene of the demos and the exclusion of the theatrical form are strictly interconnected in Plato's *Republic*. This does not mean, as it is often said, that Plato excluded art to the benefit of politics. He excluded politics *and* art, both the idea of a capacity of the artisans to be 'elsewhere' than at their 'own' workplace and the possibility for poets or actors to play another identity than their 'own' identity.

I also tried to show how modern democracy and modern revolution are connected with this new distribution of the sensible that delineates a specific place for art, a specific feeling called aesthetic feeling. It is not a mere coincidence that made the art museum emerge at the time of the French Revolution; neither is it a mere factual influence that led from Schiller's idea of a specific 'aesthetic state' to Hölderlin's idea of a new, sensory revolution and to the Marxist revolution of the producers. Modern democracy is contemporaneous with the emergence of the aesthetic. By this, I mean a specific sphere of experience suspending the forms of domination governing the other spheres of experience: the hierarchies of form and matter, of understanding and sensibility, that predicated domination on the opposition of two humanities, differentiated from the very constitution of their sensory experience. This re-partition of the spheres of experience is part of the possibilities of refiguring the question of places and parts in general. As we know, it did so in an ambiguous way: it was not for casual reasons but because of the exceptionality of aesthetics that replicated the paradoxical 'exceptionality' of politics.

The exceptionality of politics has no specific place. Politics 'takes place' in the space of the police, by rephrasing and restaging social issues, police problems, and so on. Aesthetic autonomy, on the contrary, has specific places. But the definition of those specific places is bound up with the equation between a form of art and a form of life. The solitude of the aesthetic experience was bound, from the very beginning, with the promise of a future community where there would be no more art or politics as separate spheres of experience. This means that, from the beginning, aesthetics has its politics – which, in my terms, is a metapolitics, a manner of 'doing politics' otherwise than politics does. Aesthetics opposes to both the practices of political dissensus and the transformations of state-power the

metapolitical project of a sensory community, achieving what will always be missed by the 'merely political' revolution: freedom and equality incorporated in living attitudes, in a new relationship between thought and the sensory world, between the bodies and their environment.

This project has taken a variety of shapes and undergone many transformations that eventually led to its reversal: Schiller's aesthetic education, the new mythology dreamed by Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin, the human revolution of the young Marx, the constructivist project of the Soviet artists and architects, but also the surrealist subversion, Adorno's dialectics of the modern work, Blanchot's idea of May '68 as a 'passive' revolution, Debord's 'derive', or Lyotard's aesthetic of the sublime.

Here I have to spell out what is at stake in my discussion of Lyotard's late work, a point which remains unclear in *Disagreement* and that I have tried to develop in some subsequent essays (cf. Rancière 2003b, 2004a, 2004d). What is at stake is the understanding of dissensus, which Lyotard turned, through the category of the sublime, into a new form of absolute wrong. That absoluticization was not apparent in *The Differend* but it became more and more obvious in the following books. That turn has been obscured in the Anglo-American reception of Lyotard by the concepts of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Lyotard's thinking of differend and wrong has been too easily aligned with a poststructuralist critique of the subject and a postmodern perception of the end of grand narratives, which would result in a relativist view of the plurality of languages and cultures. That perception conceals what is a stake in Lyotard's theory and in the way of thinking dissensus that his late books epitomized but which characterizes much more widely what I call the 'ethical turn' of aesthetics and politics.[6]

The absoluticization of the wrong began in fact with the so-called postmodern affirmation of a break between a modern epoch where the proletarian would have been the universal victim, subject of a great narrative, and a postmodern time of micro- or local narratives. This break has no historical evidence. All my historical research had been aimed at deconstructing that presupposition, at showing that the history of social emancipation had always been made out of small narratives, particular speech acts, etc. So the argument of a breakaway from the time of the great narrative and the universal victim seemed to me beside the point. More accurately, it was beside the point unless it was in fact embedded in another narrative of an absolute wrong. My assumption is that this was

precisely the point. What Lyotard was doing was not breaking away from the grand narrative of the victim. It was reframing it, in a retrospective way, in order to make a new use of it.

From this point of view, *Heidegger and "the jews"* (Lyotard 1990) can be considered as a switching point that gives to the so-called postmodern argumentation a meaning that perhaps was not there and certainly was not obvious at the beginning. This meaning is that of the substitution of a narrative and of a substitution of the victim. In this text, the Jews became the subject of the new narrative of modernity, the new narrative of the Western world. It was no longer a narrative of emancipation, the one-way plot of the fulfilment of a promise. Instead, it was another one-way plot: the narrative of the absolute crime that appears as the truth of the whole dialectic of Western thought, the end-result of the great attempt at forgetting the original debt of thought with respect to the Other, the Untameable or the Unredeemable.

The idea of the unredeemable debt, as we know, is itself the last stage in the transformation of the exceptionality of the aesthetic state. Lyotard interprets the aesthetic exceptionality through the grid of the Kantian sublime: as an experience of impotence. The exceptionality of the aesthetic state would mean the radical dis-agreement of sense and thought. The Kantian inability of Imagination to present the idea of Reason is overturned into a power of the *aistheton* that escapes the power of thinking and bears witness to an original 'disaster': the immemorial dependence of the mind, its 'enslavement' to the law of otherness. The first name of this Otherness is 'the Thing', the Freudo-Lacanian *Das Ding*. Its second name is the Law.

In this way, the Jewish obedience to the Law is the same as the obedience to the original experience of the 'disaster' or 'disempowerment' of the mind. Thus, the Nazi extermination of the European Jews could be interpreted as the disaster resulting from the denial of the original disaster, the last accomplishment of the project of getting rid of *Das Ding* or the Law, of getting rid of the immemorial dependence to otherness. This properly means interpreting the aesthetic experience as an ethical experience, debarring any process of emancipation. In such a plot, any process of emancipation is perceived as the disastrous attempt to deny the disaster that enslaves the mind to otherness. This thinking of a new kind of radical evil currently leads – at least among French intellectuals – to two kinds of attitudes regarding politics: one is abstention and other is support for another kind of absoluticization of the wrong, support for the current campaigns of the forces of Good against the axis of Evil.

Therefore, what is at stake in my research on politics and what ties it up with a research on aesthetics is an attempt to think a specificity of politics as disagreement and a specificity of the aesthetic heterogeneity that break away from the absoluticization of the dissensus as wrong or disaster. It is an attempt to think such exceptionality outside of a plot of purity. What is at stake in Lyotard's last work is clearly a transformation of the Adornian interpretation of the aesthetic separateness. In Adorno, the aesthetic experience had to be separated in order to hold the purity of the aesthetic promise. In Lyotard, the aesthetic purity of the work boils down to the status of sheer testimony of the Untameable.

Similarly, the Arendtian idea of the separation between political life and bare life was reversed in Agamben's theorization of the 'state of exception'. The latter becomes the great narrative of Modernity as the subsumption of political life under 'bare life'. This subsumption accounts for Hobbes' theory as well as for the Rights of Man, the French revolutionary sovereignty of the people, or genocide. The idea of the purity of politics leads to its contrary, to empty the stage of political invention by sweeping aside its ambiguous actors. As a result, politics comes to be identified with the act of a power that appears as an overwhelming historico-ontological destiny: we are all, from the outset, refugees in the homogeneous and pervasive space of the camp, entrapped in the complementarity of bare life and exception (cf. Agamben 1998; Rancière 2004c).

If, at the beginning of the 1990s, I was addressing the standard theories of the return of the political, I found myself more and more concerned with this infiniticization of the logic of exceptionality, with this double reversal of the political and the aesthetic exceptionality whose conjunction constitutes the 'ethical' trend. I try to oppose to it a way of thinking aesthetical and political dissensuality apart from the idea of purity. The exceptionality of politics is the exceptionality of a practice that has no field of its own but has to build its stage in the field of police. And the autonomy of art, in the aesthetic regime, is heteronomy as well: art is posited as a specific sphere falling under a specific experience, but no boundary separates its objects and procedures from the objects and procedures belonging to other spheres of experience.

The global logic of my work aims at showing that pure politics and pure aesthetics are doomed to be overturned together in the radicalization of the infinite wrong or infinite evil. I try to think disagreement as the wrong that cannot be settled but can be processed all the same. This means that I try to keep the conceptualization of exception, wrong or excess apart

from any kind of ontology. The current trend has it that you cannot think politics unless you trace back its principles to an ontological principle: Heideggerian difference, Spinozist infinity of Being in Negri's conception, polarity of being and event in Badiou's thought, re-articulation of the relationship between potency and act in Agamben's theory, etc. My assumption is that such a requirement leads to the dissolution of politics on behalf of some historico-ontological destinary process. This may take on different forms. Politics might be dissolved in the law of being, like the form that is torn up by the manifestation of its content. In Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, the Multitudes are the real content of the empire that will explode it. Communism will win because it is the law of being: Being is Communism. Alternatively, all political wrong could appear as the consequence of an original wrong, so that only a God or an ontological revolution can save us.

My first concern from the beginning has been to set aside all analysis of political matters in terms of metaphysical destination. For this, I think it necessary to dismiss any temporal teleology, any original determination of difference, excess or dissensus. This is why I have always tried to define specific, limited forms of excess, difference or dissensus. I do not ground political dissensus in an excess of Being which would make any count impossible. I link it with a *specific* miscount. The demos does not embody the excess of Being. It is primarily an empty name. On the one hand, it is a name for a supplementary count that has no necessity, and on the other, this 'arbitrary' count enacts the 'egalitarian' condition inherent in the legitimization of inequality itself. There is no ontological gap but a twist that ties together the contingency of equality and the contingency of inequality. The power of the demos does not enact any original excess of being. It enacts an excess inherent in any process of nomination: the arbitrariness of the relationship binding names and bodies together, the excess of names which makes them available to those who are not 'destined' to give names and to speak about the common. Difference always means to me a specific relationship, a specific measure of incommensurables.

This is what keeps me at a certain distance from Derrida's spectrality, though, obviously, I have to tackle the same kind of issues as he does. For instance, the Derridian problematic of ghosts and spectrality ties together two issues whose knot is crucial to me too: disidentification and the status of anachronism. It deals with the same problem that I confront: how are we to think the 'existence of the inexistent', how are we to think the

'supersensible-sensible'? However, in my view, Derrida gives too much presence, too much flesh to the inexistent. While deconstructing identity, he is always on the verge of reinstating it by overstating the 'identity of alterity' or the presence of the absent. As he puts it in *Specters of Marx,* we know nothing about the reality of the ghost. Yet we know that he looks at us, that he sees us and speaks to us. We do not know its identity but we have to bear its gaze and obey its injunction.

I am fully aware of the weight of 'otherness' that separates us from ourselves. What I refuse is to give it a gaze and give to its voice a power of ethical injunction. More precisely, I refuse to turn the multiplicity of forms of alterity into a substance through the personification of Otherness, which ultimately reinstates a form of transcendence. The same goes with the issue of temporal dis-junction. I also deal with the issues of anachronisms, repetitions, and so on, but I refuse to unify them in the idea of a 'time out of joint'. I rather think of it in terms of multiplicities of forms and lines of temporality. In the logic of dis-agreement, as I see it, you always consider a dis-junction as a specific form of junction (and a junction as a form of dis-junction) instead of constructing an ontology of dis-junction.

I am aware of the flipside of this argument. If there is no original structure of temporal 'disjunction', it is difficult to think the horizon of an emancipatory fulfilment. To put in other terms, if there is no ghost, there is no Messiah. If I translate the messianic proposition in prosaic terms, the question runs as follows: is it possible to ground politics on its own logic? Do we not need to frame a specific temporality, a temporality of the 'existence of the inexistent' in order to give sense to the process of political subjectivization? I prefer to reverse the argument by saying that the framing of a future happens in the wake of political invention rather than being its condition of possibility. Revolutionaries invented a 'people' before inventing its future. Besides, in the context of the 'ethicization of the political' that is ours, I think that we have to focus first on the specificity of the 'aesthetics of politics', the specificity of political invention.

Therefore when Derrida speaks of ghosts, opposing them to the binarism of 'effectiveness' and 'ideality', I prefer to speak of fictions – a term which, in my view, plays the same role but keeps us from substantializing the part of the 'inexistent'. The inexistent for me is first of all words, texts, fictions, narratives, characters – a 'paper life' instead of a life of ghosts or *Geist.* It is a poetic framing of specific appearances rather than a phenomenology of the unapparent. So when Derrida proposes to frame a

'hauntology' that would be wider and more powerful than an ontology, I prefer to speak in terms of poetics. Ontology or 'hauntology' are as fictitious as a political invention or a poem. Ontology claims to provide a foundation to politics, aesthetics, ethics, and so on, whereas a 'hauntology' purports to de-construct this pretension. In my view, it does so at the cost of substantializing the 'otherness' that undermines the foundationalist project. Now, the substantialization of Otherness is at the core of the 'ethical' enterprise. I am fully aware of the distance separating Derrida from the mainstream ethical trend and its obviously reactive politics, but I think that 'otherness' has to be de-substantialized, de-ontologized if we want to escape this trend.

This leads me to answer some questions regarding the sense of my work or the status of my discourse. Rather than founding or deconstructing, what I always tried to do is to blur the boundaries that separate the genres and levels of discourse. In *The Names of History* (1994), I proposed the notion of a 'poetics of knowledge'. A poetics of knowledge can be viewed as a kind of 'deconstructive practice', to the extent that it tries to trace back an established knowledge – history, political science, sociology, and so on – to the poetic operations – description, narration, metaphorization, symbolization, and so on – that make its objects appear and give sense and relevance to its propositions. What is important to me is that this 'reduction' of scientific discourse to the poetical moment means its reduction to the equality of speaking beings. This is the meaning of the 'equality of intelligence' that I borrowed from Jacotot. It does not mean that every manifestation of intelligence is equal to any other. Above all, it means that the same intelligence makes poetic fictions, political inventions or historical explanations, that the same intelligence makes and understands sentences in general. Political thought, history, sociology, and so on use common powers of linguistic innovation in order to make their objects visible and create connections between them. So does philosophy.

For me this means that philosophy is not the discourse that grounds the other forms of discourse or spheres of rationality. Instead, it is the discourse that undoes the boundaries within which all disciplines predicate their authority on the assumption of a specific methodology fitting the specificity of their field of objectivity. My practice of philosophy goes along with my idea of politics. It is an-archical, in the sense that it traces back the specificity of disciplines and discursive competences to the 'egalitarian' level of linguistic competence and poetic invention. This practice implies

that I take philosophy as a specific battlefield, a field where the endeavour to disclose the *arkhê* of the *arkhê* simply leads to the contrary, that is, to disclosing the contingency or the poetic character of any *arkhê*. If much of my work has been elaborated as a rereading of Plato, it is because his work is the most elaborated form of this battlefield. The *Republic* tells us that the inequality of destination is a 'noble lie' and lets us understand that the 'lack of time' that prevents the artisan to be elsewhere is a proscription of the *elsewhere* as such. *Phaedrus* shows us the link between the proscription of writing and the proscription of democracy. It draws a radical line separating the space-time of the cicadas-philosophers and the space-time of the workers, and it promises to tell us the truth about Truth. However, the truth about Truth can only be told as a myth. The equality of fairy tales underpins the whole hierarchy of discourses and positions. If there is a privilege of philosophy, it lies in the frankness with which it tells us that the truth about Truth is a fiction and undoes the hierarchy just as it builds it.

An egalitarian practice of philosophy, as I understand it, is a practice that enacts the aporia of foundation, which is the necessity of a poetical act to constitute an *arkhê* of the *arkhê,* an authority of the authority. I am aware that I am not the only person committed to this task. What is thus the specificity of my position? It is that I refuse to ontologize a principle of the *aporia.* Some thinkers put it as *difference,* at the risk of conjuring up a spectre of transcendence. Others identify it with the *infinity* or *multiplicity of Being.* We have in mind Hardt and Negri's *multitudes* or Badiou's theory of Being as pure multiplicity. Both Negri and Badiou set out to ground the unbinding of authority in a law of Being *as* unbinding. But, from this point on, it seems to me that they can complete the enactment of the unbinding power in specific spheres of practice only at the cost of some sleights of hand which in my view reinstate the principle of authority. I prefer not to set a principle of the aporia, not to put Equality as an *arkhê* but to put it just as a supposition that must be verified continuously – a verification or an enactment that opens specific stages of equality. These stages are built by crossing the boundaries and interconnecting forms and levels of discourse and spheres of experience.

By reconstructing the logic of my thinking of dissensus, I was not willing to say how we must think and act. I was just trying to explain why I went that way. I realize that my practice of philosophy makes the reading of my work difficult. This is why I am very grateful to those who have accepted

to discuss it. Let me stress in conclusion that the main point is not *under-standing* what I wrote. It is moving forward together in the discussion of the issues we are facing today. For those who want to thread a new way between consensual thinking and the ethical absoluticization of the wrong, there is still much room for discussion.

Notes

1. This text transcribes with some slight modifications the paper presented at the conference *Fidelity to the Disagreement: Jacques Rancière and the Political*, organized by the Post-Structuralism and Radical Politics and Marxism specialist groups of the Political Studies Association of the UK in Goldsmiths College, London, 16–17 September 2003. I express my gratitude to Benjamin Arditi, Alan Finalyson and James Martin who organized that conference.
2. On this point, cf. Thomson (2003).
3. See my response to Mick Dillon in the discussion about the 'Ten Theses' (Rancière 2003a).
4. Alain Badiou makes this point against me in his *Metapolitics* (2005). Žižek's criticism of the 'democratic trap' has been most clearly coined in the essay 'From Politics to Biopolitics . . . and Back' (2004).
5. Cf. the contributions of Mustafa Dikeç and Michael Shapiro to the 2003 Goldsmith's conference.
6. In his contribution to the 2003 Goldsmith's conference, Sam Chambers has argued that I endorsed, against the Lyotardian differend, an Aristotelian view of language that prevented me not only from understanding Lyotard but also from completing my own project of rethinking politics. But I referred to Aristotle in order to show the gap or the wrong lying in the heart of the classical equation man/speaking animal/political animal. The whole problem is how we conceive of this wrong. Cf. Chambers, 2005.

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