



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

FOUR

2017

What divides? The 'academic-activist divide' and the equality of intelligence

Shannon Walsh

TO THINK THE academic-activist divide it is necessary to go beyond the immediate particularities it presents. The academic-activist divide does not merely consist of a division between those working within the academy to transform society and those pursuing the same ends through direct action, community organisation, or other forms of political organisation. Rather, at base the academic-activist divide is constituted by ideas around who can think and speak, what counts as thought and speech, and through the assumption that there are supposedly 'legitimate' spaces from which thought and speech issue. Thinking through and beyond the academic-activist divide requires questioning the relation between thought and action and challenging their containment within a social order. In what follows, I seek to move beyond the academic-activist divide by drawing on the work of Karl Marx and Jacques Rancière. Far from an inward

exercise in political or social theory, the arguments made here have immediate consequences for questions of political organisation in the present moment.

The academic activist divide received an early formulation when, in 1845, Marx wrote that philosophy had ‘only interpreted the world in various ways’, when the point is to change it.¹ On the surface, the meaning of this thesis, the last of the 11 ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ drafted by Marx, is clear enough. Contemplative philosophy, satisfied with the observation and interpretation of the world, privileges thought over action. By contrast, revolutionary practice actively seeks to change the world. In denouncing the closeted practice of philosophers, then, Marx was offering a programmatic statement to be followed by all true revolutionaries. For the most part this is true. Yet it is also true that many decades of popularisation has vulgarised the thesis. Today the eleventh thesis is treated as a slogan rather than one thesis in a set of 11 as it was written. The problem with the isolated uptake of the eleventh thesis is that it can be taken to suggest the operation of two distinct modes: first, the ‘passive’ mode of thought and interpretation; second, the transformative ‘active’ mode of practice. More often than not, Marx’s famous eleventh thesis is offered to legitimate arguments that detract from ‘passive’ thought while endorsing activity. This misses much of the nuance developed by Marx around the question of the relationship between thought and action. Louis Althusser recognises this in his introduction to *For Marx*, where he critiques the eleventh thesis for its ambiguity, arguing that in counterposing ‘the transformation of the world to its interpretation’, there is a formulation that will always be only a short step away from ‘theoretical pragmatism’.²

1 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 5, Marx and Engels 1845-1847*, trans. Clemens Dutt et al. (Moscow: Progress, 1976), 5.

2 Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1969), 28.

Few who are serious about social transformation would disagree that theory must be useful, and that no serious political work can be done from within the confines of the academy alone. As such, for many activists and academics alike, ‘theoretical pragmatism’ is the correct form that intellectual activism should take. Theory alone is seen as an abstraction from the real world, but useful theory is seen to have its place in the struggle. Questions over the status of thought, or over the nature of what ‘is’, seem far removed from the concrete demands of politics. Yet these are precisely the kind of questions that a thorough interrogation of the academic-activist divide prompts us to ask. A careful consideration of the philosophical questions underlying the academic-activist divide leads to questions directly concerning the status of who can think and speak, and what counts as legitimate thought and speech. Without this detail we miss something that is fundamental to politics. Accounting for this detail is what I seek to do here.

Consider what political organisation means in a practical sense. Those who are involved in this kind of work know that it involves endless meetings, discussion, and debate. The goal might be direct action, but any coordinated action is impossible without this work of organisation.³ In short, political organisation is a fundamentally discursive practice. Much of what is involved in political organisation is speech. Political organisation involves talking to people, understanding others, and making oneself understood. This recognises Aristotle’s idea that, because we have the power of speech, humans are political animals.⁴ However, political organisation is not only speech.

3 See Campbell Jones and Shannon Walsh, *What is Political Organisation?* Auckland, New Zealand: Economic and Social Research Aotearoa, 2017. Accessed 7 August, 2017. <https://esra.nz/what-is-political-organisation/>

4 Aristotle, “Politics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Volume Two*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1988.

The academic-activist divide also concerns the placement of thought within ‘legitimate’ institutions. The success of Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ is due to how it dismantles the assumption that thought is somehow separated from the world. Marx shows that the choice between abstract intellectualism and theoretical pragmatism is a false one. The pragmatic concern with the instrumentalisation of thought and theory becomes, then, a question of strategy; while the concern with the academy as a closed space becomes a question of the placement of thought, and how this operates in the maintenance of a political community. It is to this latter question that I pay particular attention here.

As the academic-activist divide has been identified as a barrier impeding the development of left-hegemony in Aotearoa New Zealand, to begin dismantling the presuppositions that are supposed to divide academics and activists is itself a useful task.⁵ The question of whether the radical left in Aotearoa New Zealand can successfully organise within the current political situation—and I think it can—will be decided over its ability to move beyond old forms of division and fragmentation, such as the academic-activist divide. Jacques Rancière’s work is useful in addressing these organisational questions. Of particular importance is Rancière’s recognition of the ‘rationality of disagreement’.⁶ Moving beyond old forms of division and fragmentation does not mean erasing difference; rather, it involves recognising the fundamental role that disagreement plays in politics.

5 See Sue Bradford, “A Major Left Wing Think Tank in Aotearoa: an Impossible Dream or a Call to Action?” (PhD diss, Auckland University of Technology, 2014), 95-97.

6 This also signals important differences between Rancière’s thought and Habermas’s theory of communicative action, see Matheson Russell and Andrew Montin, “The Rationality of Political Disagreement: Rancière’s Critique of Habermas,” *Constellations* 22 (2015): 543-554.

Dismantling common assumptions is seldom easy. In a society increasingly premised on difference, divisions such as those between academics and activists are destined to appear as natural, or as common sense. The truth, however, is that these divisions are actively made and maintained, which means they can be dismantled. By asking ‘what divides?’ I hope to show how certain ways of conceiving the academic-activist divide uncritically presuppose division and how these presuppositions have concrete effects that reproduce the divide.

In what follows, I draw on the thought of both Marx and Rancière to demonstrate the divisions operative within the academic-activist divide. Rancière has done much to expose the political dimensions of thought and disagreement. While the primary task of this paper is to draw out the fundamental stakes of the academic-activist divide, the secondary task is to show the importance of Rancière’s work for thinking through and moving beyond these questions. In particular, Rancière’s critique of ‘the police’ and his affirmation of the equality of intelligence, both of which will be introduced below, guide this inquiry.

Thought in its place

Like Marx before him, Rancière refuses to take the side of thought over action, or the inverse; rather, he questions the very division that separates them. For Rancière, ‘there is not, on the one hand, “theory” which explains things and, on the other hand, practice educated by those lessons of theory’.⁷ As Peter Hallward attests, ‘Rancière’s most basic assumption is very simple: eve-

7 Jacques Rancière, “A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière,” *Parallax* 15 (2009): 120.

ryone thinks, everyone speaks'.⁸ What Rancière calls 'the pre-supposition of the equality of intelligence' asserts, as a starting point, that 'no positive boundary separates those who are fit for thinking from those who are not fit for thinking'.⁹

Originally a key member of the Althusserian camp and a contributor to Althusser's collective Reading Capital project, following the events of May 1968 Rancière broke with his teacher over the question of the division between those deemed fit for thinking and those not.¹⁰ In his first book, *Althusser's Lesson*, published in 1974, Rancière argued that Althusser's concern with scientific Marxism was nothing more than an attempt to preserve the privilege and autonomy of theory, and with this the freedom of academic practice against the base necessities of 'lived experience'.¹¹ The charge against 'lived experience'—central to Althusser's challenge to phenomenology during the 1960s and 1970s—became, for Rancière, a theoretical mechanism that relegated the miseries of 'daily life' to the realm of ideology and illusion.¹² Such a mechanism pitted the rational and scientific over and against the illusory and overdetermined world of social practice.

The task of the intellectuals was then to enlighten the apparently 'deluded' masses.¹³ Rancière came to see Althusser's project as a reactionary policing tool, a control mechanism that traced 'a security line around the sciences, like the security

8 Peter Hallward, "Jacques Rancière and the Subversion of Mastery," *Paragraph* 28 (2005): 26.

9 Jacques Rancière, "The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions," in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, eds. Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 281-282.

10 Louis Althusser et al. *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2016).

11 Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, trans. Emiliano Battista (New York: Continuum, 2011), 42.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*, 47.

lines others were starting to trace around factories'.¹⁴ Seen in this light, Althusser's 'class war in theory' appeared to reproduce the 'practical ideology of the bourgeoisie'.¹⁵ This was 'an ideology of surveillance and assistance' that bore a striking resemblance to the kind of thinking that gave rise to Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, a form of thought that Michel Foucault would come to discuss at length in *Discipline and Punish* as well as in the lectures preceding its publication, lectures that Rancière attended.¹⁶ According to Rancière, Althusser's emphasis on scientific Marxism attempted to preserve the privileged autonomy of intellectual specialists while keeping the worker firmly in their place. This repeated 'the old bourgeois song', entrenching the division of labour, ground up, from the instrumental technique of the worker to the lofty speculative heights of intellectual labour.¹⁷ This logic mapped knowledge and technique onto the particular function of each assigned station: for the workers 'the nobility of artisanal production, the concrete experience of matter and the charms of the rustic life'; for the intellectuals 'the hard labour of organising and thinking'.¹⁸ Importantly, this division ensured that revolutionary transformation no longer fell to the 'subject of history', the proletariat, but to experts and intellectuals.

As Rancière argued, the revolutionary question would therefore pivot on the question of 'the competence of the masses'.¹⁹ For Rancière, Althusser's position was clear enough: the masses simply did not have the skill or competence to make or

14 Ibid., 67.

15 Ibid., 4.

16 Ibid.; see Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham, Volume Four*. ed. John Bowring (Edinburgh: W. Tait, 1843); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977).

17 Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, 10.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 14. Emphasis original

even understand history, their technique and skill only being suited to the transformation of material ‘stuff’:

when it is a matter of organizing to make history, the masses must rely on the wisdom of the Party. As for knowing history, the masses should wait for the ‘theses’ that specialists in Marxism work out for their benefit. Roll up your sleeves and transform nature; for history, though, you must call on us.²⁰

From this early intervention through to the present day, Rancière has been relentless in his critique of the way the ‘intellectual world’ enacts the very divisions that legitimate and ensure its autonomy. Such a critique reached its zenith in a much later text, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, where Rancière affirms the equality of intelligences. In this text, Rancière recalls the story of Joseph Jacotot, a 19th century French school teacher exiled to the Netherlands and forced to teach a class with whom he shared no common language. Jacotot’s success in teaching his Flemish students French, without himself being able to speak Flemish, leads both Jacotot and Rancière to argue that it is possible to teach with no knowledge of the subject matter, bringing into question the near universal assumption that ‘the important business of the master is to transmit his knowledge to his students so as to bring them, by degrees, to his own level of expertise’.²¹ Central to Rancière’s work in these earlier interventions, and perhaps to a lesser extent in his more recent work in aesthetics, is a critical engagement with forms of thought that establish social divisions through assumptions about who can legitimately speak about certain things and who cannot. Presupposing the equality of intelligence is an intervention against such forms of thought. It is perhaps not surpris-

20 Ibid., 10.

21 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 3.

ing, then, that Rancière might have something to offer us when considering the academic-activist divide.

A common gesture made when speaking of an academic-activist divide is to think each category as a form of ‘occupation’, in the same sense one would speak about places within the division of labour. In *Disagreement* Rancière uses the term ‘occupation’ in a broad sense so as to retain both its active and spatial dimensions.²² The term assumes a strict connection between a place within a social structure, its associated activity, and the capacities associated with this activity. In his early work, Rancière exposed the way that this thinking underlined Althusser’s division between theoretical practice and social practice.

For Rancière, each occupation is local to a particular ‘distribution of the sensible’ that binds a community while also establishing its limits and exclusions. In simple terms, this involves a determinate fixing of the subject to an allotted place. This place endows them with a sensible identity, yet this identity is only meaningful within the logic of that distribution. The ‘distribution of the sensible’ is, therefore, not concerned with questions of the senses: sight, touch, and so on. Rather, for Rancière, a distribution of the sensible always concerns the question of meaning, and thus language, and how this operates in the establishment of a community, be this political, scientific, or otherwise. The significance of this plays off the dual meaning given to the French *partage*, which means both a division, ‘that which separates and excludes’, and a sharing, ‘that which allows participation’.²³ As Rancière writes, ‘This is what a distribution of the sensible means: a relation between occupations and equipment, between

22 Rancière uses the English term ‘occupation’ in the original French edition of *Disagreement*. See Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente: Politique et Philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), 52.

23 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 36.

being in a specific space and time, performing specific activities, and being endowed with capacities of seeing, saying, and doing that “fit” those activities’.²⁴

The apparent division between the pure space of academic reflection and the murky world of social practice takes this form insofar as the ‘academy’ is taken to be a legitimate space from which thought and thoughtful speech issue. Ultimately, this is what Marx identifies in his second thesis on Feuerbach where he deals specifically with the problem of the division between ‘the school’ and its outside.²⁵ Marx demonstrates that the question of the ‘objective truth’ of human thought is not a theoretical question, but one of practice, that thought is something done. The question as to the truth or even the possibility of human thought is, therefore, bound to the question of activity. The third claim of the second thesis gives us a sense of this. Marx states that the philosophical ‘dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking’—the question of the possibility of thought itself—‘is a purely *scholastic* question’.²⁶ Which is to say that the question of the objective truth or possibility of thought is a question that primarily concerns the school as the institutional body tasked with the practice of thinking. The point Marx makes is that questioning the reality or non-reality of thinking necessarily abstracts from the truth of its own activity. Consequently, in the third thesis Marx argues that ‘the educator must himself be educated’ and that the doctrine that places thought in opposition to action must ‘divide society into two parts’.²⁷

24 Rancière, “The Method of Equality,” 275.

25 Marx and Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 5*, 3.

26 Ibid. Emphasis original. Marx is, of course, also referring to the scholastic philosophy that dominated European educational institutions between the 10th and the 16th century and formed an early version of what has become the modern university. Rather than referring specifically to any scholastic doctrine however, Marx is exposing the contradictions that arise with attempts at the closure of thought.

27 Ibid., 4.

What Marx shows is that the ‘dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking’ is a game of high stakes for the school. In order to preside over the division between thought and non-thought, the school must ignore the fact that such a dispute is necessarily ‘thought out’. That is, in questioning the reality or non-reality of thinking, thought is necessarily exercised. This might not sit so comfortably for those practically minded activists (or indeed academics) who are quick to dismiss philosophical pretension, but it is equally damning for those within the academy who place themselves as the gatekeepers of reason. Marx is not arguing against the pretensions of abstract thought, he is affirming the universality of thought as a human activity. He is asserting that thought is something done, something with material conditions upon which it relies. Most importantly, Marx shows that thought is something that exceeds those societal bounds, those divisions, which will perpetually attempt to rein it in.

That thought is a capacity shared by anyone and everyone, and that the recognition of this subverts social divisions and hierarchies, is important to questions of political organisation. In Marx’s much later work on the Paris Commune, *The Civil War in France*, he celebrates the commune’s ‘working existence’ along these same lines.²⁸ This is also central to Kristin Ross’s analysis of the Commune. Ross stresses the contemporary political significance of the Commune:

More important than any laws the Communards were able to enact was simply the way in which their daily workings inverted entrenched hierarchies and divisions—first and foremost among these the division between manual and artistic or intellectual labour. The world is divided between those who can and those who

28 Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (New York: International Publishers, 1933), 48.

cannot afford the luxury of playing with words or images. When that division is overcome, as it was under the Commune, or as it is conveyed in the phrase ‘communal luxury,’ what matters more than any images conveyed, laws passed, or institutions founded are the capacities set in motion.²⁹

Ross draws a direct link between Marx’s analysis of the Commune in *The Civil War in France* and Rancière’s early work on the poet-artisans of the 1830s and 1840s in *The Nights of Labour*.³⁰ As Ross rightly argues, such forms of organisation and the possibilities they offer are not limited to 19th century France. My argument here is that 21st century Aotearoa New Zealand might learn something from them. In the following section, I outline Rancière’s notion of ‘the police’ or ‘police logic’ as the contemporary dominant distribution of the sensible, and consider ways in which the academic-activist divide is itself caught up in this particular way of thinking. This is contrasted with Rancière’s thought around the meaning of politics to show how the presupposition of the equality of intelligence can be and is practiced through the ‘working existence’ of political organisation.

The police and politics

The dominant distribution of the sensible Rancière identifies as operative today is ‘the police’, or police logic.³¹ The police logic

29 Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2015), 50.

30 Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Dury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); see Ross, *Communal Luxury*, 45-50.

31 See chapter two of Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

imagines a world where subjects amount to their place and function without remainder. An individual's occupation, which is to say those ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of speaking that are associated with the name that signals their apparent activity—academic, activist, banker, beneficiary, prisoner, student, wage worker—becomes their sole measure. This particular distribution of the sensible sees itself as complete and permits nothing outside its narrow bounds. Of course, it is not actual individuals who are registered here, but subjects as they appear to the police—as objects to be observed. We can, after all, easily conceive of an individual that belongs to several of these groups.

Much like the early materialism Marx criticises in the 'Theses on Feuerbach', the police logic is one of presence and visibility, a logic of surveillance.³² The police, then, begin to look a lot like the all-invasive 'panoptic gaze' described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* that influenced Rancière's early critique of Althusser.³³ The police logic is strictly circular in that its observational operations establish the visibility of its subjects, yet it is only the apparent 'givenness' of this fleeting identity that makes these operations possible. In this sense, the police imposes the identities of subjects from the outside.

This also means that, contrary to the conventional understanding, the police are not limited to the forceful administration of the law through the use of violence. As Rancière states, 'Policing is not so much the "disciplining" of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of occupations and the properties of the spaces where these *occupations* are distributed'.³⁴ The police logic is fundamentally a logic of observation, counting and measurement.

32 For Rancière's own discussion of the "Theses on Feuerbach" see chapter one of Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, trans. Emiliano Battista (London: Continuum, 2011).

33 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; see Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, 158n4.

34 Rancière, *Disagreement*, 29. Emphasis original.

The pure positivity of the police logic is directly contrasted with what Rancière sees as politics itself. Politics, for Rancière, ‘exists through the fact of a magnitude that escapes ordinary measurement’.³⁵ In his ‘Ten Theses on Politics’ Rancière gives the example of a police officer intervening in a public demonstration, urging people to ‘Move along!’ because there is ‘nothing to see here!’³⁶ The operations of the police consist in ‘recalling the obviousness of what there is’ and ‘what there is not’.³⁷ It is precisely against and in excess of the counting operations of the police that politics takes place; when that which the police take to be inexistent or invisible makes a claim for its existence and forces its recognition. Politics and the police are therefore antagonistic toward one another and in perpetual conflict. The presupposition of the equality of intelligence is the condition of politics; the police posits a hierarchy of discourses, or a hierarchy of intelligence. This serves as the foundation for a particular distribution of the sensible. The presupposition of the equality of intelligence, then, forces a break with the police logic of occupation and containment. If the future of the left in Aotearoa New Zealand will be decided over its ability to move beyond old forms of division and fragmentation, and in particular the division between activists and academics, then confronting division with a principle of equality seems a promising strategy.

Rancière traces these conflicting logics back to ancient philosophy. As mentioned above, Aristotle claims in his *Politics* that the possession of *logos*, or speech, marks the human as a political animal distinct from the animal whose voice (*phônê*) can only indicate pleasure or pain.³⁸ This marks the difference,

35 Ibid., 15.

36 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 37.

37 Ibid., 15.

38 Aristotle, “Politics,” 1988.

Rancière notes, between a logical ‘discursive articulation’ and the mere ‘phonetic articulation of a groan.’³⁹ That is to say, the division between sensible discourse and nonsensical noise, or between thought and expression.⁴⁰ For Rancière, this capacity for speech signals the universal human capacity for thought and is constitutive of politics itself.

While the *logos* is that which originally defined the political animal, Rancière notes that this ‘is in no way the given on which politics is then based’.⁴¹ Rather, the uneven distribution of this capacity is precisely that which ‘orders’ a political community. Such an ordering divides bodies between rulers and subjects, between those who give orders and those who follow them, between those who think and those who merely act. This enacts a ‘symbolic distribution of bodies’ between those who possess *logos*, ‘those who really speak’, and those whose voice indicates pleasure and pain, but no genuine thought.⁴² For Rancière, this is the ‘fundamental conflict’ at the heart of politics: a conflict between the universal capacity of the political animal as the ‘speaking being who is without qualification’, and this speaking being’s participation in a closed political community structured through the hierarchical distribution of *logos*.⁴³

Opinion or equality?

It is tempting to suggest that contemporary democracy has taken a form that recognises our shared *logos* through the privileged

39 Rancière, *Disagreement*, 2.

40 *Ibid.*, 30.

41 *Ibid.*, 22.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*

position now held by ‘opinion’. This ‘post-truth’ politics that we hear so much about today suggests the reign of individual opinion over disseminated scientific fact. In the face of this we currently witness widespread, and indeed largely justified, outrage, not only over the ability of those in power to tell blatant lies, hold inconsistent positions, and shamelessly contradict themselves, but to also embody their prejudice in the form of policy and executive orders. The recent US election and all that has followed has done much to bring this phenomenon to mainstream attention, yet it is really only an extreme example of a much broader tendency. Donald Trump is the most visible embodiment of this type of politics. Eliminating the symptom without attacking the cause, however, is meaningless.

The reign of opinion merely signals the established political community’s ‘identification with itself, with nothing left over’.⁴⁴ ‘Opinion’ in this sense is the mirror image of a political community; it simply recounts what it already took to exist within its borders. As this recounting finds no remainder, the reign of opinion constitutes another form of political closure. It is a pre-established political community’s reflection upon itself, a doubling of itself, a weighing of its lots and a balancing of interests. It is a ‘system of interiority’ which erases the fundamental conflict at the heart of politics—the fact that the ‘democratic’ count is always incomplete and that any supposed completion necessitates an exclusion.⁴⁵ Here, then, the police logic of occupation extends to the parliamentary sphere. In this, ‘opinion’ becomes ‘the very name for being in one’s place’.⁴⁶ This is why the reign of opinion is ‘post-democratic’. If politics is constitutive of the universality of logos, a condition that does not permit

44 Ibid., 106.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

any closure without remainder, then democracy is not the formal politics of cyclical elections that we know today, but rather ‘the institution of politics itself’.⁴⁷ Democracy, then, is not limited to those nations in which a democratic system of governance has been or is being established. As Rancière writes: ‘Every politics is democratic in this precise sense: not in the sense of a set of institutions, but in a sense of forms of expression that confront the logic of equality with the logic of the police order’.⁴⁸ As Rancière demonstrates at length, ‘democracy’ as it is practiced within the parliamentary sphere today is more often concerned with managing the interests of the ruling class.

One solution often offered to the ‘problem’ of opinion is to establish the legislative authority of the scientific community and to hold those in power accountable to scientific fact. The political stakes of this question shift depending on where the problem to be addressed is located. For example, many see this tyranny of opinion as a particular ‘problem’ inherent to democracy. Too much democracy, perhaps, or too little education. Either way the problem is seen to be one of an inability of the demos to make the right decisions for themselves. Outrage over Trump or Brexit often takes this form. This fear seeks to erase what is specifically political within democracy, which is precisely its excessive, anarchic nature. Against this, the community of scientists are then called in to flatten the anarchy of opinions. We return to a situation where we must ‘divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society’.⁴⁹

From a policy perspective there is, of course, much desirable in the idea of holding those in power accountable to scientific fact. To take one example among many, such legisla-

47 Ibid., 101.

48 Ibid.

49 Marx and Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 5*, 4.

tion seems urgently needed when it comes to policy addressing climate change. Yet scientific solutions to something like climate change and the right of scientists to lead are not the same thing. It is necessary to decouple power and knowledge. This is where Rancière makes important developments beyond Foucault. In Rancière's own words, 'where Foucault thinks in terms of limits, closure and exclusion, I think in terms of internal division and transgression'.⁵⁰ Such a difference hinges on Rancière's presupposition of the equality of intelligence: 'it's the question of equality—which for Foucault had no theoretical pertinence—that makes the difference between us'.⁵¹

If, for Foucault, knowledge and power are synonyms, for Rancière 'knowledge' entails the circulation of words and methods that belong to no one, and are therefore at the disposal of anyone whatsoever. This involves a deliberate separation of power and knowledge. Thought, theory, method: these all become weapons in a struggle. This turns Plato's critique of writing as being ignorant as 'to whom it should speak and to whom it should not' into an important political fact.⁵² This flies in the face of those communities who claim the exclusive authority to speak on particular matters over those who are affected by these matters but left without a voice. As such, the separation of knowledge from the source of its enunciation that is enacted by writing is politically important. This decentering becomes a principle of equality: it shows that knowledge and strategies of thought are available to be used by anyone whatsoever, regardless of where they are placed within society. In breaking the power/knowledge relation,

50 Jacques Rancière et al., "Jacques Rancière: Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to Democratic Disagreement," *SubStance*, 29 (2000): 13.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Plato, "Phaedrus," in *Complete Works*, eds. John M. Cooper and D.S Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 552; Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 38.

then, Rancière returns thought to its status as a political weapon that can be mobilised by anyone and everyone. The circulation of knowledge ‘forgetful of its origin and heedless of its audience’ is in direct antagonism with the closed communities of professional politicians and political experts.⁵³

That such debates have once again found their way into mainstream discourse is promising.⁵⁴ We are living through a moment where the potential for radical change is real and, more importantly, widely desired. What recent events such as Brexit, the election of Trump, or the massive mobilisation around Jeremy Corbyn and the UK Labour party show, is that the left can no longer blame a population that is resistant to change for their own failures. The morning after the election of Trump saw a disavowal of the very conditions that made that sequence possible. Many were and are outraged that such a thing could happen. Often it seems that this is accompanied by a desire to return to an imaginary past. Consequently, the rise of nationalism and the increasing visibility of the far right means figures such as Angela Merkel suddenly appear progressive. The real risk at this moment is not the instability inaugurated by this new era of political change, but of turning back to the ‘reasonable’ social democrats and their managerial vision of a peaceful equilibrium between already counted parties.

In Aotearoa New Zealand we are not immune to these international developments. This is why it is vital that we develop new forms of political organisation that embrace disagreement and antagonism not as a principle of division, but as one of equality. Such organisations will find strength in their ability to mobilise difference without the necessity of division. They will find strength in this difference, not through some ‘magic’ of

53 Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 94.

54 For example the ‘Global March for Science’ on 22 April, 2017.

theory, but through the common equality that we realise in the ‘working existence’ of political organisation.

The fact is, of course, that academics and activists are already working together in different forms of political organisation. This in itself subverts the division. The academic-activist divide only exists when it is presupposed and maintained. That academics and activists are presently developing new organisations and have done so in many sequences of the past is proof of their equality. Rancière has articulated these ideas superbly, yet it is not necessary to read *Disagreement* or *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* to understand this equality. Join an organisation and begin to organise with others; attend a meeting or a reading group; participate in a protest or direct action. All of this can be messy, confusing, and even frustrating and there is no guarantee of success. You will disagree with others and others will disagree with you. This is exactly what political organisation involves.

Conclusion

As I have argued with Rancière, politics is conditional on the universal human capacity to think and speak, to freely mobilise words and use these in ways that ‘exceed the function of rigid designation’.⁵⁵ This means that efforts to make sense of the world are part of the terrain of struggle and should not be left to the care of the ‘experts’. This is why ‘democracy’ is a word worth fighting for. It is very easy for us on the radical left to dismiss democracy if we only consider it in terms of its liberal institutionalised meaning. Not only does this miss what is radical in

55 Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia, “Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière,” *Diacritics*, 30 (2000): 115.

it, it capitulates to the discourse of our supposed masters who would very much like politics to remain a site of containment. The terms by which we organise ourselves and our sense of the world are also part of the political struggle. When it comes to the academic-activist divide, then, we can see how presupposing this divide will also reproduce it. This is why I have attempted to ask ‘what divides?’ rather than presupposing the divide and then proceeding to somehow bridge it. To reiterate, the academic-activist divide is real and it has higher stakes than merely those of performance. But it is historically constituted and therefore fundamentally unnatural. Much like the division of labour, it is made and maintained.

Here I have offered an analytical framework for considering what constitutes the academic-activist divide. Understanding this is a crucial step in moving beyond the divide itself. Yet understanding alone is not enough. Political organisation is something done. Rancière argues that intellectual equality is not ‘out there’, given in the pure positivity of observable reality; rather, equality is ‘a condition that only functions when put into action’.⁵⁶ What Marx celebrated as the ‘working existence’ of the Paris Commune is precisely what we need to be working toward today. To organise together beyond difference, to embrace this difference and take it as a sign of strength, is to enact the presupposition of the equality of intelligence.

If we organise under the presupposition of intellectual equality we are forced to admit that there is not an ‘academic’ discourse on one side and an ‘activist’ discourse on the other, there are only various ‘configurations of sense, knots tying together possible perceptions, interpretations, orientations and movements’.⁵⁷ Journals such as *Counterfutures* have a crucial role to

56 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 52.

57 Rancière, “A few remarks,” 120.

play in providing a platform to foster this kind of debate and discussion outside the often narrow confines of academic writing. Such 'configurations of sense' need to be created simultaneously with the work of political organisation, rather than imposed from the outside by so-called experts. This can be a difficult and even messy way to organise. It involves experimentation, uncertainty, and often failure. But it also provides the opportunity to learn from one another, to challenge one another, and to find strength in that. Above all, and against the police order that always seeks to maintain the status-quo, it involves recognising the already existing capacities of each and every one of us to be political subjects. This, to my mind, is a promising way to proceed.

If you like what you have read, please subscribe or donate.



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

© Copyright Counterfutures 2017