In late May of 2001, the administrative assistant in the department where I work at Clemson University suggested I attend a meeting taking place in the community. It concerned the accidental death of a twenty-year-old African American named Kashef White. I had not heard of him, although in the coming months I would rarely stop hearing about him.

It seems that Kashef White had been hit and killed by a car, driven by a white student of the university, on or near a street within the university’s borders. How this happened remains in dispute. Here’s one version of the story. Kashef White had been drinking, had wandered out into the road, and the student hit him. The police arrived and took appropriate measures, including administering a field sobriety test to the driver, who, although he had alcohol on his breath, passed. By that time, there was nothing that could be done for Kashef White. This was the official version, embraced by the police, city officials, and the uncle of the white student, a former sheriff who referred to Kashef White as a “drunk black kid.”
Here’s another version. Kashef White was standing on the curb, with one foot in the street. The driver swerved, hit him, and drove down the road a little before turning back. The police arrived late, administered the field sobriety test, but never took seriously the possibility that the driver was drunk. This was the story told by the witnesses at the scene, all of whom were African American.

One other detail is worth noting. Although the driver of the car did receive a necessarily subjective field sobriety test, only Kashef White’s body was chemically tested for alcohol, and he was found to have been intoxicated. This discrepancy in the testing method did not sit well with Clemson’s African American residents.

The meeting I attended was a tense one. The police and several city officials were there. Over two hundred of Clemson’s one thousand African American townspeople attended. They cited years of police and city abuse and neglect. In addition to the usual offenses, such as Driving While Black, there was neglect of infrastructure, lack of administrative oversight, and a demeaning attitude toward the city’s African Americans. (The latter I was able to see on display that night, and many times after.) It was difficult to distinguish the accurate memories from the faulty ones, the facts from the exaggerations. After all, like most white people in the town of Clemson, I had very little interaction with the African American community and had never spent any time in its neighborhoods. It was clear to me, however, that even if a small percentage of the stories they told were true, this was a city with a racial problem.

The residents demanded that there be changes in the policing practices at Clemson. The police, while denying that there were major issues that needed to be addressed, offered to review those practices. Near the end of the meeting I suggested that the historical record of police self-monitoring was not a promising one, and that perhaps people ought to organize a civilian review board for the police themselves. This suggestion found favor among some of the prominent members of the African American community, and for the next several years I organized with people in that community.

Like a lot of local organizing efforts, this one went well for some months. We had a lot of people and energy at our early meetings. We were able to canvas neighborhoods and leaflet every residence in the African American neighborhoods in Clemson. We created a sense of
excitement that, I was told, was uncommon in Clemson’s African American community. For its part, the city, while steadfastly refusing to consider a civilian review board, quietly went about building roads and improving parks in African American neighborhoods. They also announced that they would henceforth install video cameras in police cars and use computer programs that could trace patterns of racial discrimination in arrests. And, of course, they created a task force to study the problem of racism in the city they denied exhibited any.

City officialdom’s view of the events surrounding Kashef White’s death was marked by a vigorous denial that there was anything interesting to be discovered through them. It was unfortunate that someone had been killed, but proper procedure had been followed and proper protocol observed. Even the fact that the victim’s blood-alcohol level had been tested, but not that of the driver of the vehicle that killed him, was chalked up to attempts to discover what had occurred that night. After all, the driver did pass a field sobriety test. And, presumably, Kashef White’s body did not.

Very few readers of this piece will be tempted to embrace such a view, common though it is among public officials. But that leaves us with the question of how to understand these events. It would be helpful to provide a framework that would not only help make sense of them, but that would allow us to move forward. In other words, it would be helpful to have a way of considering these events that does more than situate them meaningfully in the past, but would also allow us to frame future action, to think about what we might do as well as what we have done.

Here is where the thought of Jacques Rancière assumes its importance.

What I would like to do here is to offer a sketch of several elements of Rancière’s political thought that seems to me to capture trenchantly what happened in the couple of years following Kashef White’s death. This sketch will suggest not only a way of understanding the past but also of thinking about future political action. Although a discussion of Rancière’s entire political approach is too rich to be considered here, I hope at least not to betray the elements of his thought that are implicit here and that influence this essay.

The framework I offer here is one that might be called philosophical, in the sense that it is reflective and broadly conceptual. Rancière himself has offered important criticisms of political philosophy, particularly
A framework for thought, however, is not the same as a ground. What I hope to do here is to offer some philosophy and some politics, without falling into the trap of offering a political philosophy.

Perhaps the best way to start is with the very concept of politics. For Rancière, politics is not a common occurrence. “Politics doesn’t always happen,” he writes. “It happens very little or rarely.” This does not mean, of course, that politics as we understand it in the everyday sense is rare. People vote; they write their elected representatives; sometimes they go to a demonstration. For Rancière, however, these are not matters of politics. Politics concerns something else. It concerns equality. And equality arises only when the traditional mechanisms of what are usually called politics are put into question. “Politics only occurs when these mechanisms are stopped in their tracks by the effect of a presupposition that is totally foreign to them yet without which none of them could ultimately function: the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone.”

Politics is about the presupposition of equality. Although this might seem the starting place for all political thought, Rancière’s approach to it is diametrically opposed to that of traditional theories. And it is in his inversion of the operation of the presupposition of equality that the riches of his thought are to be found. In order to understand this inversion, contrast it with some more familiar concepts of equality.

The economist Amartya Sen argues that “a common characteristic of virtually all the approaches to the ethics of social arrangements that have stood the test of time is to want equality of something—something that has an important place in the particular theory.” What differentiates these theories is the various things that each argues there should be equality of. Should there be equal liberty, equal opportunity, equality of resources, equality of goods, or some combination of these? Sen himself argues for the equality of the capacity to achieve important functionings.

In appealing to the concept of equality, Sen has provided a common rubric for contemporary theories of justice. He is right to argue that theorists like John Rawls and Robert Nozick can be seen as equality theorists. Moreover, he is right to argue, as he does, that this equality is rooted in their commonly held view that human beings should be treated with equal respect or concern. Their differences lie in the character of the equality they endorse. What is it that equal respect or
concern requires? For Rawls, it is equal liberty, equal opportunity, and equal access to the best minimum standard of living the society can provide. For Nozick, the requirement is simply one of equal liberty; anything else would be an infringement upon that fundamental right.

Approaching equality this way may seem clearly correct. Isn’t the fundamental question of politics, after all, the question of what people deserve from the society they live in, given that we are all equal? For all of these theorists, and for others writing in this vein—which is to say for the entirety of current mainstream political philosophy—the question of equality is a question of its distribution. What is it that should be equally distributed among society’s members? That is the question driving contemporary political philosophy. It has a presupposition that needs to be questioned, and it is not the presupposition of equality.

Where there is distribution there must be a distributor. And indeed, for these theorists there are institutions, usually governmental ones, that are responsible for that distribution. The claim of equality, then, is a claim directed at governing institutions on behalf of the individuals those institutions govern. Put another way, equality is a debt owed to individuals by the governing institutions of a society or a community.

For Rancière, this is not politics; it is policing. “Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it the police.” Although Rancière does not, to my knowledge, discuss the distributive theorists of mainstream Anglo-American political philosophy, his definition of policing is an exact depiction of the goals of such philosophy.

To think of politics in terms of policing is a common approach, and not only among political philosophers. Progressives, whether inside or outside of academia, often ask ourselves questions like the following: How should health care or education be distributed? What should the legally enforced minimum wage be? How should we think of affirmative action or reparations for slavery? At the peak of identity politics, many demands were reduced to the question of what was owed to African Americans, or women, or gays and lesbians.

There is nothing wrong with these demands, limited though they often are in scope. But they are not what Rancière means when he
speaks of politics. Politics is not a matter of how distributions arise and
the principles by which they should be given. It is not what the people
who should be the subject of politics do. Distributive approaches to
justice imply political passivity. Distributions are what people receive;
they are not what they do or create.

Why is this? Distributive theories of and approaches to justice put
equality at the end of the process. Equality, in these views, lies in what is
given to people, what they are entitled to receive from others. For some
philosophers, this may seem an odd way of looking at things. After all,
Isn’t one of the key distinctions in ethical and political theory that
between consequentialists and deontologists, where it is the consequen-
tialists that are concerned with the end of the process and the deontolo-
gists with the means? For Rancière, however, deontological approaches
like that of Nozick or, to a certain extent, Rawls still focus on the end of
the process. While they are not concerned with how much happiness or
how many goods people wind up with, they are still concerned with
what institutions owe to individuals. If goods or happiness do not lie at
the end of the process, people still do. Equality is owed to people by
governing institutions.

Suppose we were to take things the other way around. Suppose that
instead of making equality the outcome of a political process of dis-
tribution, we were to make it the presupposition of political action.
Suppose that we were to treat equality as something other than a debt—
as instead a wellspring, a motivation, a value through which we conceive
ourselves and our political interventions. Politics would then be the
presupposition of equality, and not its distribution. What would be the
significance of this inversion, this reversal?

The first and most important change is that equality would no longer
concern, or at least would no longer primarily concern, what govern-
ments or institutions do. It would be a matter of what people, those
whom Rancière sometimes calls “the people” or “the démocr” (as in
democracy), do. The people start from the presupposition of equality,
and then act from there.

I would like to look more closely at this presupposition of equality,
asking two questions whose answers will lead us back to South Carolina
and Kashef White. The first question is one of specification. If we pre-
suppose people to be equal, what is it that we are presupposing people to
be equal in? After all, people differ in many ways: height, physical prow-
Can we say more exactly what the presupposition of equality actually presupposes? The second question is one of the consequences of this presupposition. What follows from it? Where does it lead? Or, to put the question in Rancière’s terms, given the presupposition of equality, what is the politics that follows from it?

To answer the first question, we must appeal to Rancière’s book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Joseph Jacotot, a partisan from the French Revolution, flees France after the Restoration. His travels lead him to Flanders, where he settles as a schoolteacher. The problem for Jacotot, however, is that he does not speak Flemish, and his students do not speak French. This, of course, is generally considered a stumbling block to effective pedagogy. Jacotot is not dissuaded from teaching, however. He utilizes a copy of Fénelon’s *Telemachus* in a dual-language edition, teaching the students from it. Eventually, he assigns them a paper, to be written in French. Their only resource for doing so is the same book. The students turn in papers that are top notch, from which Jacotot draws the conclusion that people are equally intelligent.

What is the basis for this conclusion? The problem of education, Jacotot thinks, is not that people diverge in intellectual abilities. Rather, it is that some attend closely to what they are doing and others do not. There are, therefore, no natural divisions that prevent people from achieving academic success. One only has to get them to engage with the material. Jacotot assumes, among the implications of this view, that one can teach something one doesn’t even know. He tests this implication by teaching a course in law, with results similar to his first course.

What does it mean to presuppose that people are equally intelligent? This has nothing to do with standardized tests or with the ability to do advanced math or physics. Instead, it has to do with the ability of people to shape their lives. Everyone, we might say, unless they are damaged in some way, is capable of creating a meaningful life. Not on their own, to be sure, but alongside others. Each of us is capable of meeting the challenges life puts before us, without appeal to an authority that must guide us through our own ignorance. Surely, there are things that others can teach us. But we are capable of cobbling those teachings together into a meaningful whole, and far more capable of teaching ourselves many of those things than the hierarchical order in which we live would lead us to believe.

That is why, in the *Dis-agreement*, Rancière says that the mechanisms
of policing cannot occur without the presupposition of equality. He writes, “There is order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you.”

Is Rancière arguing here that people are equally intelligent? No. He is offering it as a presupposition. Why? In order to see where this presupposition might lead. “Our problem,” he writes, “isn’t proving that all intelligence is equal. It’s seeing what can be done under that presupposition. And for this, it’s enough for us that the opinion be possible—that is, that no opposing truth be proved.”6 But who is it, then, who should embrace this presupposition? Those who are seeing what can be done, those who will act under this presupposition: the people, the dēmos.

Who are the people, the dēmos? They are those who, in every society, are presumed to be unequal to others who are better situated. They are those who, in the police order, have been classified as less equal than others. As Rancière sometimes puts it, they are the part that has no part, the uncounted.

We must be clear here, because it is easy to misread Rancière. There is not a specific group of people who are the uncounted, as though it were those people and no others. In a police order, there are many types of classifications that create many types of inequalities. There are economic classifications, racial and gender classifications, psychological and sociological classifications. The people, the dēmos, consists of those who, in a given classification, are unequal to others in that classification. The people are those who have no claim to contribute to the public discussion and debate, those who are, from the perspective of the police order, invisible. Politics, then, is a process of declassification. “The essence of equality,” Rancière notes, “is in fact not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with the controversial figures of division.”7

This leads us to the second question: that of what follows from the presupposition of equality. What follows is the creation of a situation of what Rancière calls “dissensus.” In thinking of politics as dissensus, Rancière goes against much of the grain of political thought, which sees the project of politics as arriving at consensus, at agreement, at a commonly accepted order. Rancière does not deny that there may, at the end
of a political process, be some sort of accommodation. We must recognize two things, however. First, the accommodation will not be something offered to dēmos by the powers that be; it will be something that the dēmos imposes upon those powers. Freedom, as we know, is not given; it is taken.⁸

Second, the accommodation is not where the politics lies. The politics lies in the actions of the dēmos, in its acting upon the presupposition of equality. And in doing so, politics is the creation of a dissensus. It is the refusal to recognize the existing order of things, not in the name of another order, but in the name of equality. “Political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being.”⁹

We might be tempted to think of the demonstration of equality as one that is made only before or against those who are well situated in the police order. Equality would then be simply the demonstration of dissensus by the part that has no part, to the part that does. That would be a mistake. “This is the demonstration of a struggle for equality which can never be merely a demand upon the other, nor a pressure put upon him, but always simultaneously a proof given to oneself. This is what ‘emancipation’ means.”¹⁰ To act out of the presupposition of equality is a demonstration that runs in two directions: to the other and to oneself.

It is not difficult to see why this must be, both theoretically and politically. If acting out of the presupposition of equality were only a demonstration to the elites, then it would likely undercut the presupposition itself. It would be parasitic on the other to whom the demonstration is made, and thus be more of a Hegelian desire for recognition than a demonstration of equality. Although the motivation for political action must come from the oppression a dēmos feels out of being denied equality, this does not mean that its demonstration must be entirely oriented toward those who have engaged in that denial. In fact, to do so risks a becoming parasitical on the other that would subvert the very equality at the heart of political action.

Historically, we can see evidence of this in various political movements, from the black consciousness movement in South Africa under the guidance of Steven Biko, to various indigenous people’s movements.
such as the Zapatistas, to the emergence of feminist and queer studies departments in universities. These are moments of self-demonstration, as well as demonstration to the other. They are at once a proof of equality that the dēmos offers to itself and action out of its presupposition.

The history of these moments of self-demonstration, however, is a politically fraught one. They run a risk that is complementary to the one just cited. If political action directed solely toward the other can become parasitical on that other, self-demonstration can, and often has, become self-involved. This is identity politics. The emergence of identity politics, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, shows the dangers of political self-centeredness. One’s own history and oppression become the centerpiece of politics. There is an inability to recognize other oppressions and other political movements. The politics of solidarity gives way to the politics of ghettoization. This not only undercuts political effectiveness (oppressed groups often need solidarity with others in order to succeed); it also reinforces the idea of a police order with given identities and roles.

Rancière’s thought, then, provides a barrier against this complementary danger as well. Identity politics is not a form of declassification. Through its rigidity and delegation of identities and roles it is a reclassification. It is a dissensus from a given police order, to be sure, but only in the name of another police order. It is, then, far from a demonstration of equality. Political action, if it is to remain political, does not coalesce into a particular classificatory order; instead, as Rancière insists, it demonstrates the contingency of any classificatory order.

If political action does not yield identities, however, what does it give us? How might we think of the group that engages in political action? What may we say of it? For Rancière, political action does not produce identity; it produces subjects. “By subjectification I mean the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of experience.” What does this production amount to?

A subject is what appears through a political process. We must distinguish this appearance from the more well known subjectification analyzed by Michel Foucault. For Foucault, also, a subject appears through a political process, but in a very different way. The subjectification described by Foucault is an intersection of dispersed practices that cre-
ate, through relations of knowledge and power, a subject. This subject is a person with particular qualities, behavioral orientations, and understandings of itself.

For Rancière, subjectification is, in one sense, the opposite of this. It is the emergence of a collective subject that is the subject of action rather than its object. Where for Foucault subjectification happens to the object of particular political processes, for Rancière it is the active creation of a particular type of political subjectivity by those engaged in it. To become a subject is to refuse one’s particular place in a given police order, to reject the hierarchy that has assigned one a certain role. And in doing so, one makes oneself (a oneself that is collective rather than individual) appear, stand out from the background to which one has been assigned. And in that sense, politics is always irreducibly aesthetic; it creates something that did not exist before. A collective subject is produced from the material of a hierarchical social order—one that, like other artistic productions, creates new ways of seeing and being seen.

This is why Rancière writes, “Politics does not happen because the poor oppose the rich. It is the other way around: politics (that is, the interruption of the simple effects of domination by the rich) causes the poor to exist as an entity.” This does not mean, of course, that there are no poor people before the creation of a political subject. In fact, it is often poverty that drives politics. Rather, it is that “the poor” come to exist as an entity, as a collective subject, only with the emergence of politics. The poor, the proletariat, Palestinians, Native Americans: these are products of political struggle, subjective emergences that arise alongside that struggle, the creation of a people that did not previously exist. Without politics, as Rancière tells us, “there is only the order of domination or the disorder of revolt.” If Foucault tells us histories of how people come to be created into certain kinds of subjects, Rancière provides the tools for thinking about how we might create ourselves into other kinds.

Politics, then, is always a matter of community. “Democracy is the community of sharing, in both senses of the term: membership in a single world which can only be expressed in adversarial terms, and a coming together which can only occur in conflict.” One cannot create politics alone. One finds oneself part of a police order, alongside others. To resist that police order alone requires that one join with them in the formation of a community that is at the same time a political subject. It
is not that one cannot speak or act politically on one’s own. Our history is filled with examples of this. Rather, it is that that speech and that acting only become political when they result in or foster the creation of a political movement. By themselves, individual speech or action is not politics but rather the invitation to it. It is when a group takes upon itself the refusal of a police order in the name of equality that politics happens. “A community of equals is an insubstantial community of individuals engaged in the ongoing creation of equality. Anything else paraded under this banner is either a trick, a school or a military unit.”

To engage in the practice of equality, to become a subject, while it is above all a demonstration to oneself and the formation of a community, is not simply an affair of self-involvement. Rancière’s use of terms like *dissensus* and *conflict* indicate this. The practice of equality occurs in the context of a particular hierarchy in a particular police order. Nothing guarantees that politics will create change. The “verification [of equality] becomes ‘social,’ causes equality to have a real social effect, only when it mobilizes an obligation to hear.” We must be clear here. Politics is not to be confused with the success or failure of change, even if change is its goal. Politics is a process. It is the emergence of a collective subject acting under the presupposition of its equality, an acting that disrupts a particular police order. This does not mean that the question of political effects or political change is unimportant. It is of the highest importance. Political movements often fail. However, we must distinguish the existence of politics from its effectiveness. Otherwise, we risk missing it in the moment of its happening, and, on the other hand, ascribing it where it does not exist.

Thus armed with this understanding of politics, what are we to make of the events following the death of Kashef White? What understanding does Rancière offer us, and how might it help us think about organizing?

What city officials sought, above all, was to deny that there was a problem of racism in Clemson. In this, the police chief was much more forthright. At the meeting I cited in the beginning of this piece, he admitted that, given what the African American population was telling him, there might indeed be a racial problem in the city. The mayor and the city council, however, would not concede this. (In this, as in other areas surrounding these events, city officials were content to let the police chief hang out to dry.) The strategy of denial took several forms: isolating the event of Kashef White’s death from its surrounding con-
text, creating a discursive space for African Americans who agreed with their point of view (none of whom, it should be noted, were residents of Clemson), blaming outside agitators (i.e., me).

These strategies worked for the media, but not in the African American community. They had seen all this before. And the problem the city faced was not simply a problem of media spin. The deeper problem was one of dissensus. There was a group of people whose history of marginalization in this college town placed them at the bottom of the police order. They were keenly aware of this, and they were being encouraged by a group of local organizers to recognize and express their equality. Other measures had to be taken—thus the road building, the park enhancements, the videotape machines, the youth scholarships to the local recreation center, and so on. During the time of our agitation, the African American community was the object of a modicum of city largesse. However, we never did get what we were asking for: a civilian review board. Given Rancière’s perspective, it is easy to understand the dynamic at play here. To give what was asked for would be an admission of equality. The city would have had to concede that the African American community was right in what it demanded. Therefore, the equality of intelligence would be vindicated; an obligation to hear would have been motivated. The city government, by offering that which was not asked for but which would be welcomed in any case, remained the source of distribution and the arbitrator of what was needed. There would be gratitude, perhaps, but not equality. The police order would be maintained.

Not that the city told themselves this. The strategy was cynical, but it was not created by folks who had read Rancière. What city officials made clear was that residents could say what they wanted, but, as elected officials, they were in charge of the decisions of who gets what. In addition, they listened, when they did, with an air of palpable condescension. One night in the summer of 2001, the city council agreed to meet with the African American community in a local community center. Residents complained about various inequities that were of long standing in the community. The mayor, in particular, resisted hearing these complaints. He and the city council were there, he announced, only for one purpose: to understand what issues residents had with the police. Of course, conflicts with the police, as every organizer knows, are often merely flashpoints for deeper concerns. The city council was having none of this, however. If there was a problem (which of course it
denied), the problem was with the police, not with the mayor or city council. Finally, one resident came to the microphone and shouted in frustration, “Why are we talking to you, since you can’t even hear what we’re saying?” The residents there hollered in agreement.17

Thus the city’s response: a project of deflecting and defusing dis-sensus in an attempt to return to the consensus of the given police order.

What about the other side of the struggle, the one Rancière addresses directly? What happened to the struggle by Clemson’s African American community?

We had a good bit of success, at least for a little while. People in the community were very welcoming and eager to present their stories. (I found organizing in the South to be very different from organizing in the North. For one thing, it seems to involve more time sitting on porches drinking sweet tea. I take this to be a good thing.) There were also a good number of people willing to come to meetings and get involved in one way or another. At its peak, our organizing meetings had nearly twenty people. This is particularly impressive, since many of those involved were single parents or worked more than one job.

The success did not last, however. First, the passive support of much of the community did not turn into active involvement. We who organized were embraced but not joined. Second, those who were active diminished in numbers and involvement over time. After the first several months, organizing came down to half a dozen of the most committed residents of the community. Eventually, we tried a different tack, running two residents for city council. They lost, and worse, their campaigns did not increase voter turnout in the African American neighborhoods.

How might we understand this? At the time, it was particularly frustrating for me, since, as I emphasized to the African American community, Clemson, as a college town in the South, did not want to have racial trouble on its hands. We had a lot of leverage; all we had to do was use it. I chalked the failure to sustain a longer term campaign up to a combination of a lack of a civil rights movement and, not unrelated, a history of intimidation. South Carolina in general, and Clemson in particular, did not seem to have a piece of the 1960s civil rights movement. The university quietly integrated when it saw the writing on the wall at other universities, and nobody in the community seemed to have been active during that period. Well, there was one person: the brother of one of the people who organized with us. From the stories I heard, he stood up to
the police on a regular basis. One day he was taken into custody and beaten so badly he lost his mind. Nobody was charged in the crime, and the African American community got the message. He still wanders the street aimlessly, as though a warning to those who would dare confront the authorities. I see him every once in a while.

It was not that the movement, modest though it was, was a failure. We earned some concessions, even if they were not the ones we sought. People had the experience of organizing, so they now have skills they didn’t have before. This could be important, depending on the future of the community. However, we did not experience what Rancière calls politics. That is the crucial point, and the one that I only began to understand looking back after reading his work. I told myself at the time that people seemed to lack hope. I still think that’s right. But there was something else, too. People in Clemson’s African American community seemed unable to think of themselves as equal to Clemson’s whites. They didn’t say this to me, of course, and likely did not say it to themselves. Rather, it emerged through how they acted or didn’t act. The intimidation they suffered, their physical isolation and poverty, made it difficult for them to see themselves as actors in their political situation. They were, so it seemed to them, incapable of influencing their social conditions in the way that Clemson’s white community was. I think they were mistaken in this. But the important point here is not what I thought but how they thought. They had difficulty acting out of the presupposition of their own equality, because they had difficulty presupposing that equality.

We should not be surprised at this. Rancière counsels us on the rarity of politics, and Clemson’s experience is a common example. However, by understanding this we can also understand what else is needed in order to create politics. This can help us in organizing, and in not mistaking politics on those occasions when it does arise. The dissensus that emerged only in germ in Clemson in the summer of 2001 is a possibility that remains, not only in Clemson but everywhere. We must be sober about its difficulty and its fragility. But if we are to retain a sense of politics at all, we must also remain vigilant about its openings. Rancière’s political writings provide a significant source of both analytic rigor and, not less important, hope in what can never be less than an ongoing struggle.