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9.

Staging Equality: Rancière’s Theatrocracy and the Limits of Anarchic Equality

PETER HALLWARD

Against all those who argue that only the appropriately educated or privileged are authorized to think and speak, Jacques Rancière’s most fundamental assumption is that everyone thinks. Everyone shares equal powers of speech and thought, and this “equality is not a goal to be attained but a point of departure, a supposition to be maintained in all circumstances.”

In most of the work he undertook during the 1970s and 1980s, Rancière defended this supposition through a painstaking reconstruction of the subversive and elusive world of working-class intellectual production that thrived in the years (the 1830s and 1840s) immediately preceding the Marxist interpretation of class struggle. In much of his subsequent work, he has pondered its implications in fields ranging from historiography to aesthetics (The Names of History [1991]; La Malaise dans l’esthétique [2004]) and from political to literary theory (Disagreement [1995]; La parole muette [1998]). The most significant and consistent of these implications is essentially anarchic. As Rancière af-
firms it, equality is not the result of a fairer distribution of social functions or places so much as the immediate disruption of any such distribution. Equality refers not to place but to the placeless or the out of place, not to class but to the unclassifiable or the out of class. “The essence of equality is not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with controversial figures of division. Equality is the power of inconsistent, disintegrative and ever-replayed division.”

The basic argument that recurs throughout Rancière’s work is thus one that pits the presumptions of a disruptive equality against the advocates of an orderly, hierarchical inequality. Rancière’s most general effort has always been to explore the various resources of displacement, indistinction, de-differentiation, or de-qualification that are available in any given field. That “everyone thinks” means that they think in the absence of any necessary link between who they are and the roles they perform or the places they occupy; everyone thinks through the freedom of their own self-disassociation. No one is defined by the forms of thoughtless necessity to which they are subjected. On this score, at least, Rancière’s point of departure isn’t very far from Sartre’s familiar account of conscious freedom as indeterminate being for itself: that is, as a way of being that “must be what it is not and not be what it is.”

Of the several situations in which Rancière has defended his anarchic conception of equality, perhaps none is more fundamental and illuminating than that of theater—theater in both the literal and metaphorical senses of the term. Rather than a principle of order or distribution, Rancière presents equality precisely as a pure “supposition that must be verified continuously—a verification or an enactment that opens specific stages of equality, stages that are built by crossing boundaries and interconnecting forms and levels of discourse and spheres of experience.” As Rancière describes it, thinking is more a matter of improvisation than it is one of deduction, decision, or direction. Every thinking has its stage or scène, every thinker “plays” or acts in the theatrical sense. Every political subject is first and foremost “a sort of local and provisional theatrical configuration.”

The thematics of the stage is certainly omnipresent in Rancière’s work. Back in the mid-1970s, Révoltes Logiques had already adopted as its point of departure the assumption that, rather than a matter of “popular savagery” or “historical necessity,” revolt is first and foremost

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Staging Equality  141
“a staging of reasons and ways of speaking.”

In line with this definition Rancière went on, in *Dis-agreement*, to define politics as a matter of “performing or playing, in the theatrical sense of the word, the gap between a place where the démos exists and a place where it does not. . . . Politics consists in playing or acting out [interpréter] this relationship, which means first setting it up as theater, inventing the argument, in the double logical and dramatic sense of the term, connecting the unconnected.” Before it is a matter of representative institutions, legal procedures, or militant organizations, politics is a matter of building a stage and sustaining a spectacle or show. Politics is the contingent dramatization of a disruptive equality, the unauthorized and impromptu improvisation of a democratic voice. As Rancière puts it in a recent interview, in which he accounts for his critical distance from Negri and Hardt, “Politics is always about creating a stage, . . . politics always takes the form, more or less, of the establishment of a theater. This means that politics always needs to establish those little worlds in which . . . forms of subjectivation can take shape and stage or enact [mettre en scène] a conflict, a dispute, an opposition between worlds. For me, politics is about the establishment of a theatrical and artificial sphere. Whereas what they [Negri and Hardt] are after, in the end, is a stage of reality as such.8

In what follows, I will try to tease out the several ways in which this theatrical metaphor helps illuminate Rancière’s conception of equality and politics before considering, in my conclusion, some of the more obvious difficulties posed by such a conception.

I

The point of departure here, as in so much of Rancière’s work, is the inversion of a Platonic position. It isn’t difficult to see why Rancière has always been deeply critical of Plato. Plato is the great theorist of an orderly distribution of exclusive functions and roles, the advocate of a world in which each individual says only “one thing at a time.” In Plato’s *Republic*, to each kind of person there is but one allotted task: labor, war, or thought. Consumed by what they make or do, artisans are defined by identification with their functional place; by the same token they are excluded from those domains of “play, deception, and appearance” that Plato reserves for the exclusive enjoyment of nobility.9 Furthermore, as
Rancière has often pointed out, “the exclusion of a public scene of the dēmos and the exclusion of the theatrical form are strictly interconnected in Plato’s Republic.” For one and the same reason, Plato excludes both 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.”

The theater evoked in The Republic is a place where people who should know better get swept up in the irrational enthusiasm of the crowd. A gratuitous celebration of pure artifice, theater promotes semblance and appearance over dispassionate truth. It privileges the more “easily imitated . . . passionate and fitful temper” over reason. It allows the “rebellious principle” to prevail over “wise and calm” deliberation.

The decadent theatrocracy that Plato criticizes in book 3 of the Laws is a regime of unlicensed ignorance and disorder which has its source in a “universal confusion of musical forms” initiated by irresponsible artists. Such confusion “inspired the multitude with contempt of musical law, and a concealment of their own competence as judges,” and “once silent audiences . . . found a voice, in the persuasion that they understand what is good and bad in art; the old ‘sovereignty of the best’ in that sphere has given way to an evil ‘sovereignty of the audience,’ a theatrocracy [theatrokratia].”

The Athenian in Plato’s dialogue anticipates the probable consequence of this new popular freedom: soon the people will begin to ignore the authority of their elders and betters and then seek “to escape obedience to the law. And when that goal is all but reached, [there will follow] contempt for oaths, for the plighted word, and for all religion. The spectacle of the Titanic nature of which our old legends speak is re-enacted; man returns to the old condition of a hell of unending misery.”

The basis for this anarchic catastrophe lies in the threatening duplicity of mimesis per se. As Plato describes them, the mimetic poets “set up in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality, and by currying favor with the senseless element that cannot distinguish the greater from the less, but calls the same thing now one, now the other.” For before it condemns the immoral and decadent effect of fables, as Rancière notes, “the Platonic proscription of the poets is grounded on the impossibility of doing two things at once.” By doing two things at once, by refusing to speak in their own name, by acting at a distance from themselves or by imitating the action of an-
other, actors and poets threaten the very foundations of authority itself. Mimesis confounds the order of function and place, and thus opens the door to what Rancière will elsewhere describe as the virtual program of politics as such: “the indetermination of identities, the delegitimation of speaking positions, the deregulation of divisions of space and time.”

Theater is nothing other than the place in which such vicious indifference to functional place takes on its most seductive shape. As a bulwark to this disorderly improvisation, Plato will oppose the choreographed performance of communal unity and discipline; a similar logic will recur again and again in subsequent theories of orderly political performance, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Ngugi wa Thiongo.

On the relatively rare occasions when Rancière addresses the question of theatrical performance directly, his concern is to liberate it from this choreography and all that goes with it. He addresses the relation of performer and spectator in terms illuminated by the theory of equality he adapts, in The Ignorant Schoolmaster (1987), from the maverick nineteenth-century pedagogue Joseph Jacotot. Jacotot’s simple premise is that “all people are virtually capable of understanding what others have done and understood.” Everyone has the same intelligence, and differences in knowledge are simply a matter of opportunity and motivation. On the basis of this assumption, superior knowledge ceases to be a necessary qualification of the teacher, just as the process of explanation (together with metaphors that distinguish students as slow or quick, that conceive of educational time in terms of progress, training, qualification, and so on) ceases to be an integral part of teaching.

Applied to the theater, Jacotot’s premise allows Rancière to develop a general account of the “emancipation of the spectator.” Classical theorists of the theater, from Plato to Rousseau, considered spectators to be trapped both by their passivity (in contrast with the performer’s activity) and their ignorance (in contrast with the performer’s knowledge of artistry and illusion). The modern response has most often been to explore the potential of a “theater without spectatorship”—a drama purged of passivity and ignorance, either by maximizing the distance between spectacle and spectator (Brecht) or by minimizing it (Artaud). Along the same lines, Debord, after defining spectacle by its externality, was to call for the elimination of all theatrical “separation” or distance. These and comparable responses maintain, however, the basic structure upon which specular inequality depends—the hierarchy of passivity and
activity, of “incapacity on one side and capacity on the other.” In contrast, theatrical “emancipation starts from the opposite principle, the principle of equality. It begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting,” when we realize that “looking also is an action which confirms or modifies the distribution of the visible, and that ‘interpreting the world’ is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it. Spectators are active, as are students or scientists: they observe, select, compare, interpret. They relate what they observe with many other things that they have observed, on other stages, in other kinds of spaces. They make their own poems with the poem that is performed in front of them.”

In theater as much as in politics or art, the distance of the spectacle is essential to its effect. It is because the spectators never wholly identify with what they see, because they draw on their own experiences, because they retain a critical distance, that they are able actively and knowingly to engage with the spectacle. What they see is never simply what the performers present or intend. Spectators “pay attention to the performance to the extent that they are distant.” Just as educational emancipation does not involve the transformation of ignorance into knowledge, so too the emancipation of spectators does not involve their conversion into actors so much as a recognition that the boundary between actor and spectator is itself elusive. What we have to acknowledge is that “any spectator already is an actor of his or her own story and that the actor also is the spectator of the same kind of story.” By the same token, Rancière’s account of social emancipation begins when an actor hitherto condemned to an oppressively definite role (a life defined by exploitation and toil) wrests the privilege of leisure and autonomy typically enjoyed by a spectator (the luxuries of unprofitable time, of “idle” contemplation, of individual or idiosyncratic taste) and thereby changes the general distribution of functions and roles. “This is what emancipation means: the blurring of the opposition between they who look and they who act,” between those who are trapped by their function or identity and those who are not.

Rancière’s position here bears more than a passing resemblance to the central concern of his contemporary, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. For both thinkers, the political is not grounded in a positive human property or way of life, but rather in a more primordial impropriety or lack of foundation. “The subject of mimesis,” as Lacoue-Labarthe explains, “is
nothing in itself, strictly ‘without qualities,’ and able for this reason to ‘play any role’: it has no being of its own.” Every “imitation is a depropriation,” the dissolution of a “proper” identity, type, or myth. If Plato is especially hostile to theater, it is because those who speak on the stage do not speak in their own name and do not identify with or authenticate what they say: because they behave as what Rancière will describe as political actors. Politics, as Rancière defines it, is the process that authorizes the exercise of power by those with no sanctioned authorization or authority. Politics is the process that founds the power to govern other people on nothing other than “the absence of any foundation.”

In a couple of his contributions to Révoltes Logiques, Rancière explores and attacks the logic behind successive plans, in the second half of the nineteenth century, for “a theater of the people.” Michelet defends his version of a théâtre du peuple in line with Plato’s original presumption: “The customs of the theater are what shape the laws of democracy. The essence of democracy is theatrocracy.” But Michelet inverts Plato’s meaning. Whereas “theatrocracy was for Plato the noise of the mob that applauds itself as it applauds its actors, for Michelet it is a thinking community founded upon the very essence of popular theater.” Such a theater operates like a “mirror in which the people observe their own actions,” through a “performance without separation in which the engaged citizen writes and enacts his own victories”.

We might say that Rancière, no less than Michelet, also agrees with Plato—but rather than invert his interpretation, he revalues it. Rancière’s theatrocracy is another untutored expression of the people, but, unlike Michelet’s, it is one that proceeds with a maximum of separation, at a maximum distance from the community’s sense of itself.

More precisely, Rancière’s conception of equality might be considered theatrocratic in at least seven overlapping respects.

1. It is “spectacular.” Every verification of equality is part and parcel of what Rancière routinely calls a reconfiguration of the perceptible, a repartition of the sensible and in particular of the visible. Equality is here a matter of a visible anonymity (a qualification which suffices, all
by itself, to distinguish Rancière’s conception of politics from Alain Badiou’s emphasis on the strictly indiscernible status of a generic inconsistency). Rancièrean politics generally begins with a demonstration or manifestation of the people. “The essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to get the world of its subjects and its operations to be seen.”

Against any misérabiliste conception of politics—any account which, like that of Hannah Arendt, assumes that the misfortune of the poor lies is their being unseen, in their exclusion from the political stage—Rancière notes, “all my work on workers’ emancipation showed that the most prominent of the claims put forward by the workers and the poor was precisely the claim to visibility, a will to enter the political realm of appearance, the affirmation of a capacity for appearance.” There is politics most obviously when people come out to demonstrate in the street. When crowds form in Rancière’s work, it generally isn’t (as with Sartre) in order to storm the Bastille or its contemporary equivalents; they come together to stage the process of their own disaggregation.

By the same token, the counterpolitical action of what Rancière calls the “police” is antispectacular first and foremost. Against Althusser, Rancière insists that “police intervention in public spaces does not consist primarily in the interpellation of demonstrators but in the breaking up of demonstrations.” Rather than solicit a submissive subjective recognition or response, the police dismantle political stages by telling would-be spectators that there is nothing to watch. They point out “the obviousness of what there is, or rather, of what there isn’t: ‘Move along! There is nothing to see here!’” Whereas political actors turn streets into stages, the police reestablish the smooth circulation of traffic.

2. It is artificial. Like any spectacle, a political sequence flaunts its artificiality. Politics is a masquerade without foundation, the performance of an antinature. A political subject is someone who acts out the principle of equality and in-difference, who plays the role of those who have no role, who takes on the costume of those who have nothing to wear. As a general principle, Rancière believes that “it is in the moments when the real world wavers and seems to reel into mere appearance, more than in the slow accumulation of day-to-day experiences, that it becomes possible to form a judgement about the world.” It is in such
moments that Rancière’s critique of the theoreticism he associates with Althusser, and with the Marxist tradition more generally, acquires its most compelling force. From Kautsky to Althusser, theoretical authority has maintained that “the masses live in a state of illusion,” that workers or “producers are incapable of thinking through the conditions of their production” and domination. Rancière’s political actors invert both principles: it is because they know exactly what they are doing that the people are likewise the true masters of illusion and appearance.

3. It privileges multiplicity over unity. A theatrocratic democracy is never monological for the simple reason that “there is no voice of the people. There are scattered voices and polemics which in each instance divide the identity that they stage [qu’elles mettent en scène].” For the same reason, there is not one form of emancipatory knowledge but several, not one logic of capital but various “different discursive strategies which respond to different problems” in different situations.

4. It is disruptive. Peopled by multiple voices, the theater is likewise the privileged place for a more general displacement. Theater is a place for the out of place. Every theatrical experience undermines the great police project, which is also the ambition of historians and sociologists—the ambition to see people properly “rooted in their place and time.” Hence the exemplary importance of those théâtres du coeur in mid-nineteenth-century Paris, to which Rancière devoted two substantial articles in Révoltes Logiques. A place that suspends conventional relations of obedience or deference, the theater haunts the embattled bourgeoisie of the 1840s as a doubly subversive locale. On the one hand, it is a place in which the “dreams of mutant minorities” can be acted out in fantasmatic form. On the other hand, the material “division of the stalls” turns them into a space of immoral collisions and collusions, a place in which apprentice tailors might pose as “dandies from the world of fashion” and where respectably married men can fall under the ephemeral spell of harlots and actresses. In partial anticipation of those political spectacles which take shape in February and June 1848, these crowded theaters offer a nightly reminder of the fact that only “an uncertain line separates the seated bourgeois audience members from the people standing in their ‘little places,’ places which aren’t proper
places.” As Rancière presents it, everything about this theatrical experience, from the time wasted in jostling queues through to the impulsive responses of untutored audiences, contributes to its troubling confusion of reality and fiction.  

It would not take Napoleon’s censors long to devise a defense against this threat, a defense which continues to serve as the guiding principle for cultural counterinsurgency to this day. First and foremost, audience members were fixed in their appropriate place, in a reserved seat, like so many temporary owners of property. At the same time, the theater was safely purged of its working-class spectators, spectators whose time was to be ever more intensively consumed by their economic function alone. Then, in the space thus emptied, new theaters for the people could be established on the basis of a dual illusion—that the people, at a folkloric distance from bourgeois culture, are both “spontaneously theatrical” and in need of more deliberate cultivation. The goal is to eliminate any element of spontaneity or improvisation, to reduce every lieu de spectacle to spaces in which texts or music are merely performed, in which “nothing happens, in which actors or singers simply execute their roles and their audiences simply consume them.” The process will accelerate, of course, with the subsequent invention of the gramophone, of television, and of the attendant management of culture as a commodity for passive and primarily domestic consumption.

5. Its performance is contingent. Every theatrocratic act is of and by, but never “for,” the people. Every theatrical or political sequence must invent its own stage. “Politics has no ‘proper’ place nor does it possess any ‘natural’ subjects. . . . Political demonstrations are thus always of the moment and their subjects are always precarious and provisional.” Democracy is itself nothing other than the power exercised by the unqualified or unauthorized—the power of those who are not entitled (by birth, privilege, or expertise) to wield power. This is why Rancièrian politics cannot be accounted for in terms of antagonisms, interest groups, or communication. The model of communicative action “presupposes the partners in communicative exchange to be preconstituted. . . . By contrast, the particular feature of political dissensus is that the partners are no more constituted than is the object or the very stage of discussion.”
6. It tends toward improvisation. An art which only won its autonomy through the successive forms of its “impurification—stagings of texts and stagings of props, boxing rings, circus rings, symbolist or biomechanical choreographies,” theater is never more theatrical than when it subordinates direction to improvisation, choreography to free play. Such is the enduring lesson of that great manifesto of Rancière’s aesthetico-democratic regime, Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. According to Schiller’s conception of things, “man is only wholly Man when he plays”: in other words when he suspends any effort to impose a direct conceptual or physical mastery on people or things. If in Schiller’s famous account the statue of the Juno Ludovisi “has the characteristic of divinity that is nothing less than the characteristic of the human being’s full humanity,” it is because, notes Rancière, “she does not work, she plays. She neither yields, nor resists. She is free from the links of will and obedience.” She is free from the whole regulation of function and place. Though Schiller has other forms of play in mind, there is no better example of this logic than that of playing a role or acting a part. Like the actresses who populate the fictions of Balzac and Nerval, Schiller’s goddess attracts through her very inaccessibility: it is the elusive element of play *as such* that evades mastery or confinement.

7. It operates within a liminal configuration. This “excessive” relation of actor to role is one of the clearest instances of perhaps the most characteristic logical configuration in all of Rancière’s work, the logic whereby a given term X is precisely that which indiscerns the difference between X and non-X. In the aesthetic regime, for example, postclassical art is that which blurs the difference between art and non-art. At the dawn of the modern democratic age, working-class speech blurs the difference between workers and nonworkers. A genuine teacher seeks to blur the difference between teacher and student, and so on.

Political performance likewise takes place in the gap between two extremes, and it ends when the performers identify with either pole. On the one hand, there are the actors themselves, and action in its direct and unmediated state. A theater in which the actors identify with themselves in an “art without representation,” an art that simply expresses or prolongs the working life of its performers, was precisely the dream that inspired most of those who, like Maurice Pottecher, worked at the turn of the century to develop popular theater as a theater of the familiar, the
natural, and the sincere. A similar inspiration lies behind the metaphysical rejection, which Rancière associates with Marx, of any mimetic gap between reality and representation or appearance, any ideological distance between words and things or between people and roles. On the other hand, there is the role to be played, pure play uncontaminated by the grubby complexities of context or personality. Michelet’s heroic theater, for example, takes this second pole as its exclusive guide. “What is theater?” he asks. It is “the abdication of the actual person, and his interests, in favor of a more advantageous role.” Already at work in the archi-politics that Rancière associates with Plato, variations on this theme will continue to dominate political philosophy from Arendt and Strauss through to the revival, in France, of a “purely political” space in the 1980s, a republican space in which public actors are meant to play exclusively civic roles. A similar pairing of extremes recurs in Rancière’s conception of the aesthetic regime of art, itself a fragile liminal state balanced between tendencies either to collapse the difference between art and non-art (as anticipated in post-Hegelian visions of a life lived as art, or as embraced in the more mundane celebrations of a “relational aesthetics”) or else to reify the gap between art and life (as affirmed by Greenberg’s purified modernism, or by Lyotard’s confinement of artistic representation to the domain of the sublime or unrepresentable).

A theatrocratic conception of equality can only proceed, in short, if its actors remain other but not absolutely other than themselves. They must adopt the artifice of an “unnatural” role, but not identify with it. The only place they can occupy is the one between themselves and their role—between Rousseau’s sincerity and Diderot’s technique. Politics is extinguished when the distance between actor and role collapses into a paranoid and definitive immediacy. Precisely this tendency figures as the salient characteristic of what Rancière describes as the pseudopolitics of our present “ethical” or “nihilistic” age. Universal humanity in this postpolitical era can play no role other than that of universal victim or humanitarian object, whose rights are no longer experienced as political capacities. “The predicates ‘human’ and ‘human rights’ are simply attributed, without any phrasing, without any mediation, to their eligible party, the subject ‘man.’ The age of the ‘humanitarian’ is one of immediate identity between the ordinary example of suffering humanity and the plenitude of the subject of humanity and its rights.”
Rancière’s axiomatic conception of equality rightly affirms the primacy of subjective commitment as the basis of emancipatory politics. Along with the still more axiomatic notion of emancipation affirmed by his erstwhile colleague (and critic) Alain Badiou, in my opinion it is one of the most significant and inspiring contributions to contemporary political philosophy. Its broadly theatrocratic configuration raises, however, a number of immediate concerns.

First and foremost, its effects are unabashedly sporadic and intermittent. Rancière himself is the first to emphasize this point: political sequences by their very nature are rare and ephemeral. Once the stage is struck, little or nothing remains. An improvisational sequence is difficult to sustain as a matter of course. This is a limitation Rancière accepts along with Badiou and the later Sartre. What’s missing is an appreciation of political determination or will. What’s missing is an equivalent for what Badiou calls “forcing” (that is, the power of a political sequence to impose measurable change upon the configuration of a situation). What’s missing is an acknowledgment of the incremental aspect of even so intermittent and disruptive a conception of poor people’s movements as the one famously developed by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward. Like Rancière, Piven and Cloward privilege the direct disruption of the status quo over the development of stable if not bureaucratic means of organization (trade unions, political parties, social movements) that are easily accommodated within the prevailing order of things. “A placid poor get nothing, but a turbulent poor sometimes get something.” Unlike Rancière, however, Piven and Cloward pay at least some attention to the question of how to hang on to such gains and how to use them to enhance a capacity to make additional gains. They allow for at least some consideration of questions of strategic continuity. Rancière, by contrast, offers little systematic justification for his assumption that the politics of emancipation must or should always proceed by means of disidentification and disassociation.

This leads to a second problem. To what extent is a politics conceived as the suspension of the police a politics based on the primacy of the observer, on what can be seen of mass mobilization? Can a so insistently staged conception of politics retain sufficient critical distance from the accommodating logic of a society that has long been orga-
nized, as everyone knows, as a society of the spectacle? To what extent does a popular “becoming-spectator” retain a genuine critical edge? To what extent is today’s dominant police order, the liberal republican state, genuinely vulnerable to theatrical attack? To what extent does Rancière’s conception of equality remain a merely transgressive one, and thus condemned to a variant of that same dialectic of dependence, provocation, and exhaustion which he diagnoses so effectively in the logics of modernism and postmodernism? Or to put this objection another way: has Rancière developed an appropriately contemporary response to that deflection of politics he calls “para-politics” and that he traces, historically, to Aristotle?

For rather than Plato, it is really Aristotle who is Rancière’s most significant adversary. In both politics and aesthetics, Aristotle is the person who devises a way of containing and disarming the threats first identified by Plato. To the threat of mimetic duplicity, Aristotle responds with what will become the classical or “representative regime of art,” the association of mimesis with a particular tekhnè and hence with a more sophisticated basis for the purity of art, the hierarchy of genres, and the reign of the bienséances. To the threat of democratic disorder, the Aristotelian response (Rancière’s modern examples include Tocqueville, Jules Ferry, Strauss, Arendt, and Renaut) is to seek the political incorporation of the people’s excess—the part of those who have no part—through the controlled supervision of appropriately managed institutions. The result guarantees the deference, if not absence, of the people themselves in a dispersed, “corrected” democracy.

It is no accident that the sort of state which is most tolerant of the sort of theatrical disruption that Rancière equates with politics (because it is most secure against it) is precisely that liberal constitutional state whose origins go back to Aristotle’s Politics. Rancière’s rejoinder is to return, in effect, more or less directly to a revalued version of the Platonic diagnosis. Mimesis and democracy regain their subversive force, but in an affirmative rather than derogatory mode.

The question is whether such a move can do much to disrupt today’s forms of para-political counterinsurgency. It is worth comparing Rancière’s position on this score with that of another more conventional advocate of neoanarchist equality, Noam Chomsky. Like Chomsky, Rancière recognizes that the contemporary context for the question “does democracy mean anything?” began to take shape in the mid-1970s, at the
time when the Trilateral Commission solicited its symptomatic report on *The Crisis of Democracy*. And Chomsky would agree with Rancière, that democratic politics always involves the suspension of police power, the disqualification of authority, the equality of “anyone with anyone.” But what for Rancière is a sort of conclusion is for Chomsky only a point of departure. The active renewal of democracy proceeds through direct engagement with those developments which have allowed wealthy elites, over the past couple of decades, to weather and then disarm the threat of widespread popular participation in politics: wholesale privatization, the global imposition of structural adjustment, the coordination of transnational finance, rampant consumerism, media compliance, the politics of debt, fear, security, and so on. Rancière, by contrast, came to embrace the rhetoric of mobility and liminality at precisely the time when newly mobile, newly fragmentary post-Taylorist forms of production would deprive them of any clear critical purchase. Rancière developed his account of the interstitial and the out-of-place at a time when, as Marshal McLuhan famously pointed out, there has long been no slogan “further from the spirit of the new technology than ‘a place for everything and everything in its place.’”

Now it is a short step from a salutary insistence on our relational liminality to a potentially crippling emphasis on the indeterminate or in-between as such. Rancière defines the democratic or political community as “a community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local, through which egalitarian logic comes and divides the police community from itself. It is a community of worlds in community that are intervals of subjectification: intervals constructed between identities, between spaces and places. Political being-together is a being-between: between identities, between worlds . . . , between several names, several identities.” Rancière overestimates, perhaps, the distance between such positions and the postmodern posture that he appears to oppose. It’s far from clear that the resources of the *interval* as such can give effective analytical purchase on the forms of relation (relations of oppression, exploitation, representation, and so on, but also of solidarity, cooperation, empowerment) that shape any particular situation. Rancière is not interested, as a rule, in the domain of theater or anywhere else, in the group dynamics of collective mobilization, determination, or empowerment: the model in each case is provided by the isolated process of intellectual *self*-emancipation. In Rancière’s work, as in the work of
so many of his contemporaries, relation itself often figures as *essentially* binding, as irredeemably contaminated by mastery and the social weight of domination. Along with his mentor Joseph Jacotot, Rancière conceives of equality as independent of social mediation—in Jacotot’s terms, the rational equality of *people* is fundamentally incompatible with the necessary inequality of *citizens* and the unreason of society. In the absence of such mediation, however, Rancière’s trenchant egalitarianism seems all too compatible with a certain degree of social resignation. Politics here is less about struggle and fidelity than it is about “sporadic” discussion, improvisation and “infidelity.” For Rancière, politics is a matter of acknowledging a generalized disauthorization or delegitimation more than it is a matter of participating in antagonistic processes whereby people come to be newly authorized by a militant affirmation of principle. In short, Rancière’s emphasis on division and interruption makes it difficult to account for qualities that are just as fundamental to any sustainable political sequence: organization, simplification, mobilization, decision, polarization, taking sides, and so forth.

In particular (and this is a third problem with the theatrocratic account), Rancière’s relative indifference to questions of organization and decision leaves little place for direct engagement with the issues that pose the most obvious challenge to his egalitarian stance—issues bound up with the forms of knowledge, skill, or mastery required for effective political action as much as for artistic innovation or appreciation. No doubt nothing is more theatrical than purely improvised work, but by the same token there is no form of theater (to say nothing of music) that requires more skill or experience. The blurring of art and non-art, the idea that everything could be the subject or material of art, was made possible through unprecedented technical virtuosity—it is precisely Flaubert’s conception of “style as an absolute way of seeing” that allows him so radically to democratize the seeing of art. When Rancière reads Flaubert or Mallarmé, he is generally less interested in matters of writing or technique (Flaubert and the *artisanat du style*) than in content or themes (Mallarmé as disenchanted poet of our worldly abode).

Rancière’s more general answer to questions about knowledge, science, or skill has long been one of indifference or impatience, as if the only available alternative to the extreme scientism he embraced in his youth is an almost equally extreme antiscientism. Politics, as Ran-
cière understands it, appears to suspend all forms of authority or authorization. He assumes as a matter of course—against Plato, Arendt, and other advocates of political privilege—that “the appearance of the dèmos shatters any division between those who are deemed able and those who are not.”66 But is the old relation of theory and praxis so easily resolved? Does political action no longer need to be informed by a detailed understanding of how the contemporary world works, how exploitation operates, how transnational corporations go about their business? “We already know all this,” Rancière tends to say: everyone has always understood the way they are exploited or oppressed.

As it happens, however, according to Rancière’s conception of things there is no clear way of knowing what people may know, since what matters is less the knowledge itself than it is the posture of mastery presumed in any claim to knowledge.67 At the heart of Rancière’s long polemic with Bourdieu is an assumption that knowledge is simply there for the taking, on the model of primary language learning. “As far as human societies are concerned,” Rancière/Jacotot maintain, “it’s always a matter of learning a language” or using a familiar tool68; on this basis, most of the problems of access, empowerment, and validation that Bourdieu explores in his analysis of the configuration of various fields (artistic, scientific, educational) can be more or less dismissed in advance.

The political price to be paid for this indifference to knowledge is prohibitively high. Although Rancière offers a brilliant account of the enthusiasm that accompanies and often inspires a political sequence, he neglects many of the more intractable problems of organizing and sustaining such a sequence. This neglect isn’t a matter of ignorance. Rancière often draws attention to one of the most insistent features of the emergence, in the nineteenth century, of the modern, postartisanal working class: the confrontation with industrial mechanization and the associated deskilling of work, a process whose implications were already grasped perfectly well by the working-class delegates who attended the Exposition Universelle de 1867 and who are remembered at length by Rancière and Patrick Vauday in a landmark article in Révoltes Logiques.69 It is all the more striking, then, that (again unlike Chomsky) Rancière should have paid comparatively little attention to the more recent development of this process.

In the end, much of what is most compelling and forceful about
Rancière’s theoretical position (and this is, again, something he shares with Badiou and Lacoue-Labarthe) seems to rely on an unnecessarily simplistic articulation of all and nothing, of “no one” and “everyone.” Rancière’s politics, like Badiou’s notion of an evental site or Lacoue-Labarthe’s notion of theater, depends on the existence of a part des sans parts, a “part of those who have no part,” a group of people who are literally of “no account,” an “indistinct mass of people of no position” (my emphases). And “whoever has no part—the poor of ancient times, the third estate, the modern proletariat—cannot in fact have any part other than all or nothing.” Rancière doesn’t consistently recognize the immeasurable difference between “nothing” and “very little,” between “no part” and a “minimal part.” Rather than no part, there are many who have a very small part, a share that is minimal or marginal but that is nonetheless something rather than nothing. If a universalist project isn’t appropriately articulated with this interested, assertive, or defensive aspect, then it will never get off the ground.

The danger, finally, is that Rancière may have fallen victim to a version of his own early critique of Althusser—that he has developed an inconsequential account of democracy. Rancière’s theory may encourage us to do little more than “play at” politics or equality. Rancière’s egalitarianism, no less than Schiller’s notion of play, risks confinement to the “unsubstantial kingdom of the imagination.”

Rancière knows as well as anyone that the theater is never more theatrical than when it finds new ways of blurring, without eliminating, the boundaries with the nontheatrical. It may be, however, that any such innovative blurring can only continue, in the domain of both politics and art, if it is illuminated by a decisive commitment that is itself organized, determined, categorical, and combative. In the field of recent critical theory, after all, there are few better illustrations of this point than the consistency and resolve that have characterized, over the last thirty-odd years, the development of Rancière’s own project.