10.

Rancière’s Leftism, Or, Politics and Its Discontents

BRUNO BOSTEELS

RANCİÈRE’S LESSON

Does Jacques Rancière have a lesson to teach us, or anybody else for that matter? This opening question may seem incongruous for the simple reason that all of Rancière’s work is meant to break down the normative claim and hierarchical pretense implicit in the notion that any one person or class of persons would indeed have a lesson to teach to any other person or class. He begins in La leçon d’Althusser, where he presents a ferocious indictment of his former teacher and for a long time the very model of the master thinker, and continues in the no less unforgiving rebuttal of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology as seen in particular in the latter’s speech upon entering the Collège de France, a speech significantly titled Leçon sur la leçon, where Rancière challenges the whole pedagogical hierarchy supporting the very idea of teaching someone a lesson and puts into question the distance between the teacher and the taught subjects and objects, between knowledge and nonknowledge, or
between the knowing master and the ignorant masses. “The master’s secret is to know how to recognize the distance between the taught material and the person being instructed, the distance also between learning and understanding.” But through a new and special kind of knowledge that is neither strictly philosophical nor purely historical, insofar as it seeks to do without all figures of mastery still associated with the disciplines of philosophy and history, we also know that this is the distance most stubbornly and systematically meant to be crossed in the writings of Rancière. In fact, in a recent interview, he tries to avoid describing himself as a teacher and instead prefers to compare himself to the well-known image of the eternal student: “I am, in the first instance, a student. I am one of those people who is a perpetual student and whose professional fate, as a consequence, is to teach others.”

Rancière’s professional fate may well have been to turn from student into teacher, but this does not mean that he has a lesson to teach, in the old pedagogical sense of the expression.

And yet, at the center of this body of work we also find the fascinating description of Joseph Jacotot, in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, perhaps Rancière’s most luminous, and in my eyes certainly his most passionate, book. Subtitled *Cinq leçons sur l’émancipation intellectuelle*, this book also offers an emancipatory reconfiguration of the idea of the lesson itself: a different “lesson on the lesson,” in other words—most definitely not one to be confused with that of Bourdieu. “La leçon de l’ignorant” is how Rancière describes this radical alternative in the second chapter of his book, *La leçon de Rancière*, or “Rancière’s lesson.” I would translate, before asking myself whether there is more to the expression than the mere parallel with *La leçon d’Althusser*. In fact, already in the four chapters of this latter book, as we move from “Leçon d’orthodoxie” to “Leçon de politique” to “Leçon d’autocritique” and finally to “Leçon d’histoire,” we can see a subtle and profound shift in the very concept of the lesson and its uses. Thus, the implied author of the final lesson does not quite seem to be the same as the author of the first one. It turns out that Rancière is actually the one who ends up teaching his former teacher a history lesson, so as better to unmask both the profound apoliticism hidden behind Althusser’s dogmatic orthodoxy and the revisionism of his botched attempt at a self-critique.

Rancière, however, is no Jacotot. Despite the brilliant use of the free indirect style, his is not exactly the role of the ignorant schoolmaster.
Nor did he ever have to teach French to the Flemish youth of my native Louvain. Rather, he presents himself anachronistically, as it were, as one of Jacotot’s imaginary students whose professional fate it is to teach us a few lessons about the lesson of this ignorant master. Jacotot thus serves as a kind of anti-Althusser, following the example of Engels’s Anti-Dühring.

THE T WOFOLD OPERATIO N

The difficulty inherent in the notion of Rancière’s lesson is intimately tied to a second difficulty, which comes down to deciding whether he is a philosopher or a historian, an antiphilosopher or an archivist of popular struggles. Here too it must be said that Rancière’s work introduces an irreparable disturbance in the fixed demarcation of disciplines, with their boundaries between the sayable and the unsayable, the proper and the improper, the legitimate and the illegitimate. Precisely by introducing some play in, or by playing with, the interval between various discourses, the aim is always to derail the regimes of thought that would assign certain ways of doing, speaking, and seeing to a stable set of competences, qualities, or properties.

If it is out of the question to think the singularity of this work in disciplinary terms, perhaps a better approach consists in interrogating Rancière’s modus operandi. I am thinking in particular of the following description, which comes toward the end of La leçon d’Althusser, when the author, by way of conclusion, seeks to explain the method he has just followed throughout the book, perhaps even with an eye on a future program of studies:

I have tried to apply a double operation on an exemplary discourse [that of Althusser]: I have made an effort to reinsert it in its history, in the system of practical and discursive constraints that make it enunciable. I have sought to surprise its articulations by forcing it to respond to other questions than those of the partners of complacency that it had chosen for itself, by re-inscribing its argumentation in those chains of words in which the necessities of oppression and the hopes of liberation have formulated themselves and continue to formulate themselves. Not a refutation, because it serves no point to refute dogmatisms. Rather a mise en scène aiming to deregulate the functioning of one of these wise Marxist discourses that occupy our theoret-
ical space in order to make readable the consecration of the existing order in the discourse of the revolution. By doing so I would like simply to echo that which, in the disparity of the struggles and interrogations of our present, seeks to express itself in terms of a newfound liberty.  

For Rancière, the purpose of his thinking no doubt always lies in following this double procedure: to reinsert something (a discourse, a practice, or a regime of doing, seeing, or speaking) in its system of constraints and to derail this system of constraints itself. These two operations, of course, stand in a precarious balance to each other, always on the verge of tilting over in the hypostasis of only one of them, according to their corresponding objects or concepts: the system of constraints, which results from the act of reinscription; and liberty, which is the principle of derangement and which once again constrains the previously established practical and discursive constraints by finding undesirable or at least unexpected bedfellows for them. In a sense rather close to Foucault, liberty thus responds to the structure of constraints with the surprise of an unpredictable reinscription, just as the hopes of liberation make themselves heard as soon as the machine of necessity and oppression is ever so slightly displaced.

This double operation, moreover, may help us appreciate the force or originality of a mode of thinking, including Rancière’s own. He himself, thus, writes in the avant-propos to *The Philosopher and His Poor* that one of the presuppositions behind his reading, far from keeping with the habit “not to ask an author any questions except for those that he had asked himself,” consisted precisely in understanding that “the power of a mode of thinking has to do above all with its capacity to be displaced, just as the power of a piece of music may derive from its capacity to be played on different instruments.”

---

**Aesthetics and/or politics**

Actually, with regard to this double operation—which, to this day, seems to me to define the work of Rancière—I want to draw attention to the presence of a profound asymmetry in his treatment of art and politics. Indeed, it seems to me that art and politics are not two domains or two matrices that otherwise would receive one and the same treatment in Rancière’s readings. Rather, we should understand how art and politics
lead to two approaches or two tendencies that are deeply unequal and asymmetrical. Despite the appearance of a strict homology between them, the two actually appear almost as polar opposites.

Thus, if art is treated according to the vaguely historical order of three regimes of identification (the ethical regime, the representative regime, and the aesthetic regime), without there being any essence proper to art in itself, I want to insist on the fact that the same does not apply to politics. That is to say, especially in *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, it seems perfectly possible to define what is specific to politics (*la politique*), and this specificity certainly marks a “proper” which, even if it is constitutively “improper” (whence the commonly assumed homology with art, most notably under the aesthetic regime), is no less universally identifiable or separable as such on this account. Thus, the political triad (archi-politics, para-politics, and meta-politics), though also historical in appearance insofar as it is originally associated with the successive proper names of Plato, Aristotle (or Hobbes), and Marx, does not function in the same way as the three regimes of identification of art. If we are to believe *Dis-agreement*, rather, there exists, after all, an essence or a rational kernel of politics, which subsequently would have been covered up, denied, repressed, or obscurely designated in those three dominant forms of political philosophy.

The result is an insurmountable plurality of regimes to identify art, with the pluralization itself being the effect of one historical regime among others, whereas politics enables the establishment of a kernel of politicalness, properly speaking, which, while never natural, remains invariant throughout history. This is because in the end this is the nonhistorical and apolitical condition of politics itself: that is, what is hidden in the three forms of hitherto existing political philosophy. Besides, as far as I know, these three forms are never called “regimes,” and we can easily understand why: this is a last sign, or perhaps one more symptom, of the asymmetry between art and politics: namely, the profuse invocation of the term “regime” for the first and its relative absence in the treatment of the second, for which the term no doubt is too closely tied to the destiny of the form of the political state.
Let me dwell for a moment longer on this asymmetry, both to contextualize the question of method and to underscore the singularity of politics (or of its treatment) in comparison to art in Rancière’s work.

Indeed, following the first half of his double operation, Rancière has always been admirably consistent in stating that there is no such thing as the science or the people or the Marxism but at best a variable series of practical and discursive constraints: to put it in the more recent vocabulary, a series of regimes of visibility and intelligibility that allow certain modes of doing, saying, and seeing, all the while excluding others. This is what I would call the principle of a certain nominalism, which could be summed up in the following formula: the universal exists only in the singular—that is, in the plurality of particular modes, places, and operations. Let me recall a few examples of this nominalist tendency in Rancière—a tendency that, though perhaps badly named, he shares with the likes of Althusser and above all Foucault. All these examples are drawn from La leçon d’Althusser and from the useful collection Les scènes du peuple.

First, with regard to man: “It is not Man who makes history, but men, that is to say, concrete individuals, those who produce their means of existence, those who fight the battle in the class struggle. Marx goes no further in the critique of Feuerbach.”

Then, about science: “There is no ‘pure’ scientific practice; the latter has its forms of existence in a system of social relationships of which propositions, logical chains, and experiments (on the basis of which the ideal of science is constituted) are only elements.” Or again: “Science does not appear opposite of ideology as its other; it appears in institutions and in forms of transmission in which the ideological domination of the bourgeoisie manifests itself.”

Further, about the category of time: “Time [Le temps] does not exist but only several temporalities [des temps], each of which is always itself a way of linking a plurality of lines of time, plural forms of temporality.”

And, coming closer to the question of politics that sits at the center of our interrogation of Rancière’s work, the famous voice of the people: “History as practiced in Les Révoltes Logiques will have repeated this: there is not one voice of the people. There are shattered, polemical voices, dividing at each time the identity they put on stage.”
We arrive, in the end, at the question of Marxism itself: “The Marxism of the camp is neither a vain adornment nor a deviation that would not touch upon the pure essence of Marxism. Sure, but this also means that there is no pure essence of Marxism, but Marxisms, determinate montages of theoretical and practical schemes of power, that there is no fatality to Marxism that would globally account for the forms of subservience produced by certain Marxist powers or justified by certain Marxist discourses.”

In sum, not only is there logic to the revolt, in contrast to the official dogma of Marxism-Leninism, according to which the revolt is merely ephemeral spontaneity when it is not concentrated into revolutionary discipline thanks to the vanguard party; there is also always a revolt among various logics. As we read in La leçon d’Althusser, there exists always a plurality of conceptualities or—to use an expression from Disagreement, referring to politics in the age of militantism—“a multiplicity of modes and places, from the street to the factory to the university.” Finally, it is no doubt this taste for the plurality of practices, discourses, and stagings that explains the frequent use of the figure of the banquet as the place of the mixed and the confused for Rancière. In addition to the chapter on Plato in The Philosopher and His Poor, where we read, “The order established by the banquet is the order of mixture. If the city began with the clear-cut distribution of useful workers, politics begins with the motley crowd of the useless who, coming together into a mass of ‘workers,’ cater to a new range of needs—from painters and musicians to tutors and chambermaids; from actors and rhapsodists to hairdressers and cooks; from the makers of luxury articles to swineherds and butchers,” Rancière expresses this festive principle with particular eloquence in his text on André Glucksmann for Les Révoltes Logiques: “The discourse of revolutionary intellectuals is always a Harlequin dress, sewn of different logics.”

This being said, when it comes to politics, particularly in Disagreement, we seem to hit upon the point of exception to this generalized nominalism. Here Rancière all of a sudden seems to exchange his Harlequin coat for the appeal of a dark grey suit. Dis-agreement, from this point of view, undoubtedly presents an anomaly in Rancière’s work. Here, a thinker who has elevated a certain shyness into a methodological principle suddenly seems to experience no reticence whatsoever before
the axiomatic enunciation of “politics” (la politique) properly speaking, and, to a lesser extent, of “the political” (le politique), as in On the Shores of Politics.

These statements are well known. If I quote a large number of them in detail, it is only to enable the reader to appreciate the “special effect” of the repetition as well, as if in a profane litany:

There is politics—and not just domination—because there is a wrong count of the parts of the whole.14

There is politics when there is a part of those who have no part, a part or party of the poor.15

Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part.16

Now, politics comes about solely through interruption, the initial twist that institutes politics as the deployment of a wrong or of a fundamental dispute.17

Politics exists simply because no social order is based on nature, no divine law regulates human society.18

Politics occurs because, or when, the natural order of the shepherd kings, the warlords, or property owners is interrupted by a freedom that crops up and makes real the ultimate equality on which any social order rests.19

There is politics when the supposedly natural logic of domination is crossed by the effect of this equality. This means that politics doesn’t always happen—it actually happens very little or rarely.20

Politics occurs when the egalitarian contingency disrupts the natural pecking order as the “freedom” of the people, when this disruption produces a specific mechanism: the dividing of society into parts that are not “true” parts; the setting-up of one part as equal to the whole in the name of a “property” that is not its own, and of a “common” that is the community of a dispute.21

Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world: the world
where they are and the world where they are not, the world where there is something “between” them and those who do not acknowledge them as speaking beings who count and the world where there is nothing.22

Politics occurs by reason of a single universal that takes the specific shape of wrong. Wrong institutes a singular universal, a polemical universal, by tying the presentation of equality, as the part of those who have no part, to the conflict between parts of society.23

To recapitulate: politics exists wherever the count of parts and parties of society is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part.24

Or, again, this other recurrent formulation, though less prone to incantatory effects:

Politics begins precisely when one stops balancing profits and losses and worries instead about distributing common lots and evening out communal shares and entitlements to these shares, the axiai entitling one to community.25

Politics begins with a major wrong: the gap created by the empty freedom of the people between the arithmetical order and the geometric order.26

The only city is a political one and politics begins with egalitarian contingency.27

The reign of the “humanitarian” begins, on the other hand, wherever human rights are cut off from any capacity for polemical particularization of their universality, where the egalitarian phrase ceases to be phrased, interpreted in the arguing of a wrong that manifests its litigious effectiveness.28

Of course, Dis-agreement, like almost all books by Rancière according to the author himself, is also a conjunctural intervention, tied in this particular case to the dominant model of consensus from which he seeks to free himself, without for this reason lapsing in the other extreme, which would posit the absolute anteriority of the unrepresentable, or of the sublime. To maintain oneself “equally far removed from the consensual discussion and from absolute wrong”—such is the task of a logic of disagreement according to Rancière. I will come back to this operation, another constant in Rancière’s work, which consists in occupying the space in-between, or the non-place between two positions, according to the well-known formula neither . . . nor . . . , which at the
same time entails a categorical refusal of the false alternative either . . . or. . . . Struggle on two fronts, they used to say not so long ago: neither left-wing opportunism nor right-wing opportunism; neither anarchic adventurism nor orthodox dogmatism. Or again: neither apocalyptic nor integrated. It is within the structure of such a struggle that I would situate the peculiar use of the category of politics in Dis-agreement.

In criticizing the use of politics or the political, therefore, my aim is not to chastise the philosopher in the name of some form of antiessentialism. Nor am I taking issue with the axiomatic allure of the formalization per se. I merely wish to interrogate some of the consequences, for politics as a thought-practice, of the style “there is politics when . . .” or “politics begins there where . . .” This last formula, besides, recalls another of Rancière’s favorites, the one that precisely opens the first chapter of Dis-agreement under the title “Le commencement de la politique”: “Commençons donc par le commencement” (Let’s begin at the beginning). In the end, my question concerns the exact status of this “there is politics when” or of this “beginning”: Is this a theoretical principle or a historical fact? A logical beginning or a chronological start? A transcendental condition of possibility or an eventful occurrence? Or, the last possibility, can we hold on to both interpretations at once in a singular mixture—another banquet, this time methodological—that could very well be constitutive of Rancière’s very style of thinking?

SPECULATIVE LEFTISM

I want to tackle this larger question by interrogating just one of the possible effects of Rancière’s restricted nominalism: to wit, the risk of falling into what the author himself, in La leçon d’Althusser, almost twenty years before the reemergence of this same expression on the part of Alain Badiou, in the meditation “The Intervention,” from L’être et l’événement, calls “speculative leftism.” Indeed, I fear that the definition of politics in Dis-agreement, most notably from within the opposition politics/the police, is all too easily assimilated to the leftist scheme that in earlier times opposed, for example, the plebs and the state. This risk is all the more striking, and the objection may seem all the more unfair, insofar as it has been Rancière himself who has given us the necessary tools to dismantle the schematism of this very presentation.

Let us look at a last series of quotations, this time taken from “La
bergère au Goulag,” which is a long review of Glucksmann’s *La cuisinière et le mangeur d’homme*. According to Rancière, this important book by one of the foremost of the “New Philosophers” proposes only a purified version of contradictions, without respecting their dialectical complexity. “The whole book is an organized effect based on a purification of the contradiction: on one hand, power and the discourse of the masters (philosophers, kings, Jacobins, Marxists . . . ) organized according to the rules of state constraint; on the other, the class of nonpower, the plebs, pure generosity, whose discourse expresses the sole desire of not being oppressed.” It belongs to Lenin, among the first, to have denounced the false dialectic of this kind of dualist oppositions: “‘On the one hand, and on the other,’ ‘the one and the other.’ That is eclecticism. Dialectics requires an all-around consideration of relationships in their concrete development but not a patchwork of bits and pieces.” Rancière, for his part, proposes several refutations of this false image of contradiction:

Everything would be simple for sure if we could move in this purged contradiction: the revolt of the “wretched of the earth” against a state power represented by social-fascism. But reality is not such.

Reality: that there is no principle of subversion drawn from anything other than practices of resistance, that there is nothing beyond the distribution *partage* of servitude and of refusal, which is always and for everyone renewed; no movement of history, no ruse of reason that can ever justify oppression and servitude. Myth: the incarnation of this division *partage* in the pure opposition of power and the plebs.

The plebs: those excluded from power? But who is ever totally excluded from power? . . . Such a division *partage* is possible only at the expense of simply identifying the reality of power with the visible face of the state apparatus.

Nowhere does the conflict of power and nonpower play itself out. Everywhere the task of the state stumbles upon not the plebs, but classes, corporations, collectives and their rules, their forms of recognition and democracy, but also of exclusion and even oppression.

The discourses from below are still discourses of power and it is from the point of view of this reality that we can think the position of a discourse such as Marx’s.
Here we are back at the heart of the matter. Indeed, once he arrives at the center of his critique of the discourse of the New Philosophers, exemplified by Glucksmann, Rancière himself proposes a lesson, after all, in which we must again and always hear echoes from Marx’s thought: “Lesson perhaps of this confrontation: that there is never any pure discourse of proletarian power nor any pure discourse of its nonpower; neither consciousness from below that would suffice for itself nor science that could be imported. The force of Marx’s thought—but perhaps also its untenable character—resides no doubt in the effort to hold these contradictions, stripped bare since then in the police fictions of proletarian powers or the pastoral dreams of plebeian nonpower.” 38 Instead of purifying the contradiction, the task would thus lie in keeping it open, even if in the end this may turn out to be untenable: to find the knotty point between power and resistance, between power and nonpower, between the state and the plebs. Otherwise, these dualisms would quickly fall into the trap of speculative leftism, according to a Manichaean scheme that is as radical and profound as it is inoperative.

However, I wonder to what extent the author of *Dis-agreement* might have forgotten this lesson. Does not the opposition, no matter how contrarian, between the police as ordered partitioning of the sensible and politics as inscription of a part of those who have no part come dangerously close to the “purification” of the contradiction that would be characteristic of speculative leftism? *Dis-agreement*, whether due to its assertive style or its tactical and strategic goals, remains perhaps caught in the nets of a contradiction stripped down to such *police fictions*, on the one hand, and the *political dreams* of those who have no part, on the other.

But Rancière’s essay on Glucksmann is not the only tool at our disposal to reconstruct what I would call a critique of pure leftist reason. Even within the bounds of *Dis-agreement* we can find arguments that run counter to this leftist reading. First of all, the police is never identified without rest with the state apparatus. Second, the police does not represent a night in which all cows are grey: “There is a worse and a better police.” 39 Finally, the antagonism between politics and the police, as two heterogeneous logics of being-together, is far from the last word in the book. Rancière insists at least as strongly on the need of a binding, an encounter, or an intertwinemement between both logics, without which politics would not have any effect whatsoever on the original situation.
In other words, even if we wanted to keep the two terms, which the author is the first to problematize, there must be an inscription or verification of an effect of politics back upon the police. “We should not forget that if politics implements a logic entirely heterogeneous to that of the police, it is always bound up with the latter,” writes Rancière, and further down: “Politics acts on the police. It acts in the places and with the words that are common to both, even if it means reshaping those places and changing the status of those words.”\textsuperscript{40} In this sense, to posit the radical exteriority and strangeness of these two logics, the egalitarian and the social policing, without letting them ever tie a knot that would not be treacherous, would have been the gravest limitation of the endeavor associated with Jacotot.

And yet, a fundamental ambiguity nonetheless continues to run through the pages of \textit{Dis-agreement}. The book may very well refuse the purely external opposition between politics and the police that would bring it closer to speculative leftism. Thus, for this old Maoist, One continues to divide into Two. There is not two times one. Whence the insistence on the motifs of the originary scission and the torsion; whence, also, the recourse to the double meaning of \textit{partage}, both community and separation, sharing and dividing. This means that in the final instance, what matters is to hold the untenable, to measure the common between two incommensurables, to think together the rapport and the nonrapport.

Consider, for instance, the way in which Rancière refuses to oppose the pure ideality of doctrine and the impure mixture of reality: “There is not on the one hand the ideal people of the founding texts and, on the other, the real people of the workshops and suburbs. There is a place where the power of the people is inscribed and places where this power is reputedly ineffective.”\textsuperscript{41} To think politics always entails having to follow this type of return actions and twisted effects—or, as the case may be, their absence. In the final analysis, all this is perfectly compatible with the nominalist principle. Instead of thinking in purified oppositions such as the people against the power structures, the task would be to study the places where one paradoxically divides and inscribes itself in the other, as well as the historical modalities of this inscription.

But all this also does not exclude the fact that in other fragments of the same book, precisely with regard to the two logics of being-together, it is once again the purification, not to say the Manichaeism, that takes
priority over and above the sharing and the intertwining: “On the one hand, there is the logic that simply counts the lots of the parties, that distributes the bodies within the space of their visibility or their invisibility and aligns ways of being, ways of doing, and ways of saying appropriate to each. And there is the other logic, the logic that disrupts this harmony through the mere fact of achieving the contingency of the equality, neither arithmetical nor geometric, of any speaking beings whatsoever.” Clearly, we are far from being done with the temptations of a certain speculative leftism and its dual oppositions! Perhaps this is the price to be paid if we wish to maintain a polemical edge in the discussion against the idyll of consensus, whose noisy celebrations, as I mentioned before, Dis-agreement seeks to interrupt.

THINKING IN THE PRESENT, OR, THE AGE OF THE SENSIBLE

Given the extent of Rancière’s engagement with the history of the Left, from La leçon d’Althusser to Dis-agreement and beyond, however, it would be an act of bad faith to remain at the level of a mere critique of speculative leftism. Far more important is something along the lines of what Jacques Rancière himself, in an article coauthored with Danielle, calls “the traversing of leftism,” historically and genealogically speaking, so as to come to terms, conversely, with the “legend of the philosophers.”

Thus, Jacques and Danielle Rancière suggest, in their article for Les Révoltes Logiques, that the New Philosophers define the stakes for contemporary thinking only to the extent to which they provoke an “occultation of the militant history” of May ’68 and its aftermath. It is this “occultation” or “liquidation” of history that they propose to deactivate by trying to learn a few lessons in the history of politics:

The stakes for us lie in this occultation of the militant history that the discourse on the Gulag has produced: occultation of the conjunction of student and popular struggles, of the encounter of militant intellectuals and the masses, attempts to throw into doubt the mechanism of representation: instead the figure of a plebs appears whom the intellectual represents just as yesterday he represented the proletariat, but in a way that precisely denies representation; the plebs means both and at the same time all the positivity of suffering and popular laughter and the part of refusal, of negativity, that each carries with him, realizing the immediate unity of the intellectual and
the people; liquidation by simple denial of the objectives and aspirations of the struggles as well as of the problems they came across.43

Now, for the more recent era, could we not hope for a historical and conceptual analysis similar to the one Danielle and Jacques Rancière present in “La légende des philosophes”? Here I only express my desire that one day we will be able to read the legend, now also in the positive sense of what is truly “to be read,” concerning the long and sinuous trajectory that leads from Nights of Labor to Les Révoltes Logiques all the way to Dis-agreement. However, this historical apprenticeship, which remains to be accomplished for the post-leftist age, also poses a problem of a methodological and philosophical nature. As I suggested before, this problem concerns the exact status of the “there is” or the “beginning” and the “end,” whether in art or in politics, such as they are captured and sheltered—not without considerable scandal—inside philosophy.

This problem regarding the relation between art or politics and the historicity of their concepts and practices is certainly not unique to Rancière’s work, and it seems to me at least an equally burning issue for someone like Badiou. This also means that in their mutual attacks, the one by Badiou in Abrégé de métapolitique against Rancière’s “apoliticism,” and the one by Rancière in Malaise dans l’esthétique against Badiou’s “aestheticism,” what remains hidden or unsaid concerns precisely the other pole—art or the aesthetic regime for Rancière and politics for Badiou—being those conditions of truth, or regimes of thinking, for which each has proven himself capable of setting up a new configuration of historicity, otherwise absent or at least insufficiently elaborated on the opposite side of the polemical chiasm between the two.44

By way of conclusion, I would like to give a brief example of this new configuration and of the tasks it imposes on us, using the case of Mallarmé. The principal task consists in coming to an understanding about the double valence of Mallarmé’s case, not only as a poet-thinker of the event in and of itself, but at the same time as an innovator within French postromantic poetry.

For Badiou, the first half of this reading seems to take away all interest from the second. “Mallarmé is a thinker of the event-drama,” he writes in Being and Event, and he continues: “A cast of dice joins the emblem of chance to that of necessity, the erratic multiple of the event to the legible
retroaction of the count. The event in question in *A Cast of Dice* . . . is therefore that of the production of an absolute symbol of the event. The stakes of casting dice ‘from the bottom of a shipwreck’ are those of making an event out of the thought of the event.”45

However, it is also a matter of understanding the link between this poetry-thought of the eventlike nature of the event, on the one hand, and, on the other, the function of this poetry as an event among others in the history of modern post-Hugolian poetry. Regarding this link, of course, readers will find very little information if they limit their search to *L'être et l'événement*.

By contrast, it is the second half of the question that receives much greater attention in Rancière’s short book on Mallarmé. The latter remains without a doubt the great poet of the eventlike nature of the event, emblematized by the sirens: “Mallarmé transforms them into emblems of the poem itself, the power of a song that is capable both of making itself heard and of transforming itself into silence.”46 But we should also add immediately that according to this reading, the eventlike nature of the poem is inseparable from the equally singular relation it establishes with the place and time of its appearance: “The poem escapes the abyss that awaits it because it modifies the very mode of fiction, substituting the song of a vanishing siren for the great epic of Ulysses. What the siren metaphorizes, what the poem renders effective, then, is precisely the event and the calculated risk of the poem in an era and a ‘mental environment’ that are not yet ready to welcome it.”47 Rancière understands these two aspects—the event and its relation to an era and an environment not yet ready for it—as part of one and the same question.

Based on indications such as these, we can begin to see the consequences of a momentous philosophical decision: The value of affirming the “there is” of Mallarméan poetry, like that of any “there is,” is inseparably structural and evental, transcendental and historical. Each time there is an event, in politics perhaps no less than in poetry, we witness a breakdown of principle that at the same time allows a reconstruction of its links with history. As in the double game of liberty and constraints, one thing certainly does not exclude but rather presupposes the other. Otherwise, in the absence of such an articulation, which I would gladly call dialectical in a new and unheard-of sense, we would fall back once
again on either the liberty or the practical and discursive constraints—which would lead us to a leftist scheme all over again.

On the other hand, when it comes to politics, it is Badiou who in his recent work paradoxically has contributed more elements to reconstitute the link between history and politics, rather than Rancière. I am thinking in particular of the conferences on the Paris Commune and on the Chinese Cultural Revolution, both strongly marked by the category of “historical mode of politics” proposed by Sylvain Lazarus in his book *Anthropologie du nom.* Such a history of different modes of doing politics would evidently be hard to come by if we started from *Dis-agreement*. In this last book, there certainly are “ages” or “eras,” such as “the Marxist age” or “the nihilist age,” just as the article written with Danielle for *Les Révoltes Logiques* speaks of “the post-leftist age,” but in the last instance, history only seems to determine the successive eras of the covering up of an invariant form of politics, to which the book seeks to reconstitute its “improper property” that is also “the ultimate secret of any social order”: namely, “the pure and simple equality of anyone and everyone,” which serves as “the basis and original gulf of the community order.”

Earlier I mentioned the tactic of situating oneself in the in-between of two previously given extremes. For *La leçon d’Althusser* it was a matter of keeping the sharp edge of his master’s discourse while falling neither into pure “theoreticism” nor into “cultural gossip.” In *The Philosopher and His Poor*, the impossible goal is to follow a straight line between “the ancient ruses of philosophy and the modern ruses of anti-philosophy.” Similarly, with *Dis-agreement*, it is a question of being neither on the side of rational communicability nor on the side of absolute unrepresentability; neither in ready-to-wear sociologism nor in the hyperbole of the pure event. Now, in order for this third way to be tenable, even if the place of this third—as is that of the “third people” between the police and politics—is a non-place, it seems to me that the question of the historicity of thought imposes itself as a question that can no longer be postponed. Thus, we must come to understand what it means to think today under the condition of certain transformations in art or in politics. Not only “What does it mean to think in the present?” but also and above all “What does it mean to think in the present under the condition of certain events from the past, whether in the long or in the short run?”
The risk involved in giving too quick an answer to these questions should be clear enough: the historicity of art or politics would be reduced to mere historicism, the event would be realigned with the system of constraints that made it possible, and the radicalism of the disruption would end up getting diluted in the proverbial water under the bridge. And yet, and yet, it is possible that the price to be paid for not taking into account these questions is even higher: a radicalism pivoting on its own emptiness, a thinking of the pure “there is” of art and politics cut off from any inscription in a place and according to specific historical modes, and finally the falling back into the false appeal of a certain speculative leftism that our age, the nihilist age of the ethical turn and postpolitics, had flattered itself for having been able to do without.