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Alison Ross

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The Distinction Between Leisure and Reverie in Jacques Rancière's Conception of Emancipation

Alison Ross

Monash University

Jacques Rancière's commitment to intellectual equality is a storied, political awakening in postwar French philosophy. Its main staging points are well known: this brilliant pupil of Althusser undergoes a conversion experience around the time of the 1968 student revolts in France. He rejects the Althusserian doxa of a theoretical vanguard leading the revolutionary masses, and its premise of a division between labor and intellect. The repudiation of Althusserianism, and his noted contributions to it, marks Rancière's conversion to the practice of intellectual equality.¹ In his subsequent writings, he tirelessly puts forward the view that the oppressed understand their own oppression. His archival work on the nineteenth century implements this commitment, exploring, among others, the writing of carpenters and seamstresses. Their words, glossed over by the historians and poets of the revolution, are not unthinking expressions of an alienated state but reflective articulations of their dreams for emancipation.²

Rancière's thesis is that intellectual equality exists and that it is practiced; and one needs to be vigilant about the habits that suppress it, and acknowledge the places, moments, and modes of its expression. Intellectual equality is not an "idea," it is an experience. And, Rancière thinks the fact of its existence can be amplified in its retelling. One of the general explanatory frames used in Rancière's presentation of the topic of intellectual equality is the opposition between leisure and work. This opposition generally endorses the division between intellect and labor. Hence the division between intellectual activity and work is sustained in many theories which seek an

extended franchise for leisure, even if this extension is understood as a remodeling of labor to include fulfilling activities. Rancière's thesis of intellectual equality is unusual in this respect because he does not take the side of leisure against work. Instead he documents the experience of the state of reverie as an antidote to the division of labor. In this article, I would like to explore the significance of the role he ascribes to reverie, and consider the implications of his stated view of its independence from the leisure/work opposition. If the latter scales different types of action in relation to the value of freedom, and reverie is defined in its disengagement from action, it is important to ask why and how reverie is connected to Rancière's vision of emancipation. Is it possible to connect the positive treatment of the state of reverie with other views Rancière holds about emancipation? The question is particularly important in light of the weight given to willed action as the path to intellectual emancipation in texts like *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

The Distinction Between Leisure and Work

Recent critical theory has revived the utility of classical Marxist concepts such as "alienation" for analyzing pathologies in the contemporary labor market. There has been related attention to the contemporary applicability of those passages in Marx's early 1844 manuscripts, dealing with obstacles to the full development of the human faculties, and advocating their removal.³ The different ways the distinction between leisure and work is used to arrange this material on alienation and anthropological fulfilment is worth comment. Occasionally, it is argued that working life should provide opportunities for satisfaction and meaningful labor, thus addressing the call in Marx's early writing for attention to full anthropological development as the panacea for alienation.⁴ In this context, the distinction between leisure and work is reorganized, so that some of the satisfactions associated with the former are included in the category, and are expected as features, of work. An image of the emancipated life as a purposeful life is propagated; and, the core of this image is the pursuit of satisfying, productive work. We can mention here the rejection of industrial, factory work by nineteenth century figures like William Morris. Morris advocated the restoration of design as a component of the process of production. He saw the separation between design and production as the engine of social exploitation and misery, and insisted that work done without pleasure was not worth doing.⁵ His position, of course, was not limited to a theory of work, but extended into a general condemnation of the ugliness and waste of industrial production.

More recently, the creeping indistinction between leisure and work has been identified as the problem. Here, it is less the anthropological "development" opportunities associated with leisure that are highlighted. Instead, attention is drawn to the way that contemporary work spaces, especially in the "knowledge economy," are reorganized to include supported opportunities for play, food, companionship, and sleep; or, conversely, to the way that work is incorporated in the home through online devices and

platforms to enable more flexible working hours. Work spaces may become sites that accommodate leisure activity, or homes may become adaptable to facilitate work, but in either case the effect is to extend working hours and reduce leisure time. In this conception, the image of emancipated life is tied to leisure time, which is time considered to be entirely separate from any calculated advancement of corporate productivity.⁶

Rancière steps outside the combination of positions that take on the work/leisure distinction: rather than identifying leisure as the basis for an anthropological account of human fulfilment, he is sharply critical of the category of leisure, which he considers to be premised on the division of labor; and he identifies reverie as the antidote not just to leisure, but also to the alienation of work. The classical origins of the work/leisure distinction in Aristotle's *Politics* and the semantic field of free and noble action involved in it, can partly explain Rancière's criticisms of the work/leisure distinction, even if they do not explain the reasoning behind his view that reverie is some kind of counter-concept.

Aristotle distinguishes leisure from play or relaxation by virtue of the noble status leisure has as the "first principle of all action."⁷ He further relates leisure to both happiness and excellence and distinguishes it as the type of activity that is self-fulfilling, from those activities that produce usable objects and thus find their justification and measure in their respective uses. If human activity can be divided into requirements for both leisure and occupation, "leisure is better than occupation and is its end,"⁸ for "he who is occupied has in view some end which he has not attained."⁹ In his reflections on the branches of education, he comments that the free and exalted soul is not "always seeking after the useful"¹⁰; and the "sort of education in which parents should train their sons" is not for the proximate pursuit of use or necessity, but because an end "is liberal or noble."¹¹ Happiness, not play, is such an end. Play is disqualified as a liberal or noble end. As play is unskilled, it is unsuited to either produce excellence or culminate in happiness and cannot therefore be the end for the sake of which useful occupations are undertaken.

In Aristotle's *Politics*, the connections between leisure and happiness are raised in the context of discussing constitutional arrangements for allocating different kinds of occupations and responsibilities to different kinds of people. Happiness, he writes in the *Politics*, "cannot exist without excellence"¹² and it follows that not every man shall "be at once farmer, artisan, councillor, judge."¹³ The topic of leisure thus underpins fundamental questions such as the best form of government, and the different branches and purposes of education, insofar as these all relate to how different activities in a state are apportioned. A division of labor is necessary to support the noble ends of leisure, which include political duty.

The best form of government is the one that is "best governed" and that "possesses men who are just absolutely and not merely relatively to the

principle of the constitution.”¹⁴ The citizens in the best governed state “must not lead the life of artisans or tradesmen, for such a life is ignoble and inimical to excellence. Neither must they be farmers, since leisure is necessary both for the development of excellence and the performance of political duties.”¹⁵ It follows that the citizens in a “well-ordered state . . . should have leisure and not have to provide for their daily wants.” The secret to solving “the difficulty of how this leisure is to be attained” is in the management of “their subject population”¹⁶: “For many necessities of life have to be supplied before we can have leisure. Therefore a city must be temperate and brave, and able to endure: for truly, as the proverb says, ‘There is no leisure for slaves.’”¹⁷

In respect to its connection to happiness and excellence, the principle of leisure is not the absence of action, as in relaxation, but liberal or noble ends of action. Political duty is based in such ends. As such, it requires “good circumstances” and specifically ownership of property. In contrast, ignoble work falls to those like “artisans or any other class which is not a producer of excellence” and “have no share in the state.”¹⁸ This division of labor and property follows from the principle that connects happiness with excellence: “a city is not to be termed happy in regard to a portion of the citizens, but in regard to them all. And clearly property should be in their hands, since the farmers will of necessity be slaves or barbarian country people.”¹⁹

The classical definition of leisure is thus premised not just on the separation of the noble life of political citizens from lives devoted to base labor, but on the principle of excellence that defines the activities of the former, and the benefit that their actions bring to the common good. In Aristotle, leisure is specifically understood as purposeful activity, driven by ends that alone justify the occupation with the production of life’s necessities.

It is striking the way that components of this Aristotelian definition of leisure have been adapted to provide an image of emancipated life as purposively driven, fulfilling, and meaningful activity. For instance, aspects of this definition of leisure are pointedly used in romanticism to undermine the classical leisure/work distinction: in industrial societies, artisanal labor and crafts are meaningful activity, elevated above the factory work of the assembly line.²⁰ Rancière, however, is not party to the strategy of an extended franchise for leisure, crystallized in the idea that specific kinds of work offer meaningful labor. He is especially critical of its dependence on the notion of the superiority of craft and artisanal labor as the model of satisfying, skilled work. Of Gabriel Gauny, a “jobber” working with wood during the mid-nineteenth century, he writes: “It is work compounded of intoxication and obliviousness, not the fine harmony of attentive intelligence served by a skilled hand. It . . . divid[es] up each hour with the syncopations of anticipation and reminiscence, of productive oblivion and unproductive reverie.”²¹

Stepping back from the detail of Rancière’s position, it may be objected that the range of positions referred to here is too capacious to give a

meaningful picture of either work or leisure. To be sure, the Aristotelian context of the ancient Greek city-state is far removed from the significant changes to working life ushered in by modern industrialization. In particular, the raw division of labor that, in its Aristotelian framing, weighs the leisure that ensures the excellence and happiness of the city state against the manual labor of slaves, artisans, and farmers, seems unsuited for capturing the far-reaching implications of the changes that include the assimilation of leisure activities in work spaces, or work activities in the home in the so-called contemporary “knowledge economy” of abstract labor.²²

On its face, Aristotle’s definition of leisure as “activity” also seems remote from the specifically honorific sense attached to the leisure class at the end of the nineteenth century. Leisure activity in Aristotle is associated with excellence: the freedom won from the menial activities directed towards survival and accumulation is directed instead to reflection whose aim is enhancing the common good. In contrast, Thorstein Veblen’s classic *Theory of the Leisure Class* had defined leisure as the “non-productive consumption of time.”²³ His study examined how leisure did not suggest either “indolence or quiescence.” Rather, it valued the nonproductive use of time out of a “sense of the unworthiness of productive work” and “as . . . evidence of pecuniary ability to afford a life of idleness.”²⁴ One prominent theme in this study is the contrast between the material products of work and the “immaterial” ends perfected on account of the past release of the leisure class from “productive work.” In this respect, the activity involved in “immaterial” ends is viewed more skeptically by Veblen than Aristotle, and the examples chosen by Veblen reflect this critical attitude. He includes, for instance, the orthography of the English language as satisfying the “law of conspicuous waste” that constitutes reputable canons. “It is,” he writes, “archaic, cumbrous, and ineffective; its acquisition consumes much time and effort; failure to acquire it is easy of detection. Therefore it is the first and readiest test of reputation in learning, and conformity to its ritual is indispensable to a blameless scholastic life.”²⁵

In Veblen’s study, the moral unworthiness of the leisure class is the target of some of his formulations. He devised the now widely used notion of “conspicuous consumption” as well as the moniker of “vicarious consumption,” to define some of the social markers for the privileges of this class. Conspicuous consumption becomes “vicarious” when someone other than the leisure class is its subject; the consumption in this instance nonetheless marks the privileges of the “true” leisure class. The connection between consumption and the utility of such consumption for reputability lies, Veblen argues, on the production of waste.²⁶ Veblen outlined too the less familiar ideas of “conspicuous” and “vicarious” leisure. His intention was to point out that some of the “cares” and “utilities” of the modern household are of a “ceremonial character” and belong strictly speaking to “the performance of leisure.” The labor that ceremonial performance of etiquette requires, when it is performed by other than the free head of the household, is classified as

vicarious leisure.²⁷ Neither conspicuous nor vicarious leisure has an interest in the promotion of the common good, which, by contrast, is the anchor for the Aristotelian conception of leisure. Despite Veblen's satirical treatment of these social eccentricities, the study also acknowledges the immaterial benefits produced in a "life of idleness," among which we can include all kinds of cultural activity and the particular satisfactions they extend to their producers. In this respect, Veblen's perspective forges the same connection between idleness and reflection that also underpins the sentiments of the workers studied in *Proletarian Nights*. These workers yearn for the idle time in which to focus their attention on the production of the "immaterial" benefits that come from reflection: this includes writing, but also the enjoyment that comes from time spent building and enjoying social bonds.²⁸ It is true, however, that because Veblen's study focuses on the activity of the "leisure class" rather than the rationale for such a class, a much clearer point of connection to the issue of the "intelligence of the oppressed" is made in the references to nobility in Aristotle.

Rancière's critical perspective on the way that references to nobility organize a specific hierarchy of restricted entitlements to leisure and its social goods, extends beyond his critique of Aristotle to capture the role of leisure in the production of "immaterial" benefits referred to in Veblen's study. The Aristotelian language of nobility is revived and given expanded reference, for instance, in romantic texts about artisanal labor. And, it also has a central place as one of the organizing principles of literature, according to Rancière. Modern literature disregards the hierarchies of the older systems of representation. Classical rules of genre had determined not just appropriate topics for poetic treatment but also the appropriate style for that treatment. Modern literature is defined as "democratic" on account of its indifference to what it treats: anything may be a topic for literature. The democratic attitude to topic and style is paralleled to the post-Revolutionary shift in the distribution of roles and capacities in the social body. If noble action had previously belonged to the realm of the poetical, and prosaic life was considered to have its own territory, modern literature changed this logic of distribution:

The traditional expressive relationships between words, feeling, and positions collapsed. . . . There were no longer noble words and ignoble words, just as there was no longer noble subject matter and ignoble subject matter. The arrangement of words was no longer guaranteed by an ordered system of appropriateness between words and bodies.²⁹

The collapse of the traditional relation between words and bodies has political significance. However, in Rancière's analysis of the signal works that articulate this collapse, he emphasizes that it is style rather than politics that generally motivates its aesthetic precepts. Hence, he often refers to Flaubert's apolitical conception of style as "an absolute way of seeing things." And, he argues that in Flaubert's account of the mediocre love affairs of a farm girl in

Madame Bovary, style is not used to dignify or beautify the mediocrity of the subject matter, rather it documents the new field of microsensations which displace the traditional focus on noble deeds. Flaubert turns the expression of these sensations into the task of literature. The content of the “event” when “Charles first falls for Emma” in *Madame Bovary* is the “draught beneath the door” that “blows a little dust over the flagstones.” When “Emma falls for Rodolphe she perceives little gleams of gold around his pupils, smells a perfume of lemon and vanilla, and looks at the long plume of dust raised by the stagecoach.” And when Emma falls for Leon “weeds streamed out in the limpid water like green wigs tossed away. . . . The sunshine darted its rays through the little blue bubbles on the wavelets that kept forming and breaking.” This is what happens: “little blue bubbles” on wavelets in the sunshine, or swirls of dust raised by the wind. This is what the characters feel and what makes them happy: a pure flood of sensations.³⁰ Flaubert’s novels present the schism between the failings of characters still “trapped in the old poetics with its combinations of actions, its characters envisaging great ends, its feelings related to the qualities of persons, its noble passions opposed to everyday experience, and so on,” and the structuring perspective of the writing which defends an ontology in which “life has no purpose. It is an eternal flood of atoms that keeps doing and undoing in new configurations.”³¹ Rancière thinks this ontological disposition towards the disorder of sensations, despite Flaubert’s apoliticism, is well disposed for dismantling sociopolitical hierarchies. The disregard for the traditional association of the poetic with noble characters in modern literature more generally is one way that established patterns for organizing social perception lose their authority.

In endorsing the consequences of this literary revolution, Rancière is unsurprisingly at odds with Aristotle for whom the principle of noble action is the basis for the division between leisure and work, as well as for the distinction between the poetic and the merely ordinary.

In contrast, the critique of the idea of nobility in artisanal work in Rancière’s *Proletarian Nights* is fundamentally compatible with the Aristotelian association of artisanal labor with ignobility. Aristotle’s use of his “rational principle”³² and freeing of the citizens for excellence as the rationale for this association, differs of course from Rancière’s approving citation of the artisans’ reasoning for their unhappiness. But, they seemingly share the view of labor, whether or not it is artisanal, as an unemancipated state. Each would, therefore, distrust Veblen’s moral inflation of work and related association of leisure with waste.

However, unlike Aristotle, who associates leisure with the notion of action whose rational principle is happiness, Rancière highlights the significance of the state of reverie as an alternative marker for the emancipated life. Inaction is the principle of emancipation, and not, as in Aristotle, noble action. It is worth noting that whereas noble action has the common good in view in Aristotle, in Rancière the state of reverie is viewed specifically as a type of

experience. The general importance of this experience is related to the communicative potential that particular instances of reverie may have. Any collective significance deriving from this state of inaction depends entirely on the importance reverie holds as an (individual) experience, and it is a secondary amplification of this experience. The consequences of the position are therefore different from the target of Veblen's criticisms of vicarious leisure and conspicuous consumption. Neither of these terms model collective values; they are instead signs of collective decadence.

The theme of reverie is consistent across the scattered archival, historiographical, philosophical, literary, and aesthetic contexts of Rancière's writing. But since reverie is defined as disengagement from action, the position raises several difficulties as an approach to emancipation, which I will discuss below.

The Distinction Between Leisure and Reverie

As we saw, the distinction between work and leisure not only deals with defining types of activity, but in specifying how specific kinds of activity relate to states like happiness. It has heuristic value as a way of comprehending markers of distinction in social practices, including Aristotle's notion of excellence. And, since the distinction pertains to types of "activity," it may also be revised to reconceptualize work from the perspective of leisure, so that the notion of "meaningful work" or "self-directed" activity are points of advocacy. Rancière's criticisms of the conceptual machinery involved in the work/leisure distinction make it clear that he views it as a synthesis of hierarchically coded activities, in which "the many" labor to support the satisfying activities of "the few." He counters, rather than revises, the distinction by pointing to literary and historical instances of the connection between the state of reverie and emancipatory states and feelings, including happiness. Reverie is defined as the emancipatory feeling experienced on the basis of self-aware disengagement from activity.³³ It is true that the dislocation from action in the state of reverie does not seem to coordinate with a theory of emancipation as, for instance, advocacy for "meaningful work" might. The type of feeling involved and the characteristics of the state are at odds with any such theory, and perhaps this is his intention. Let me explain this point.

It is tempting to see in Rancière's formulation of reverie a version of the originally aesthetic concept of aesthetic disinterest. One factor in favor of such an interpretation is the emphasis on aesthetics in his conception of what is involved in altering established patterns of social perception. Clearly, Rancière identifies in the Kantian formulation of aesthetic disinterest a fundamental dislocation from the ends associated with either pragmatic activity or conceptual reflection, and he ties the Kantian position explicitly to the state of reverie.³⁴ What is key in this definition of reverie is not the aesthetic references, despite the attention they elicit in the scholarship, but that reverie is an emancipated state. This is what differentiates reverie from those types of

activities in which the ends are specified, as in the case of “work” having its end specified as “leisure,” in Aristotle. In describing instances of this state in specific contexts, Rancière highlights an accessible form of experience. In this respect, reverie is related to one of the stated motivations of the Kantian conception of taste, which is to dethrone the rule of expertise in matters of taste. The key plank in Kant’s theory of taste is that “taste is subjective.” It is a feeling that cannot be governed by rules or experts. One of the significant implications of the position is that the capacity for judgments of taste is universal; it merely requires the cultivation of disinterested attention to form. The attention is disinterested, rather than indifferent. It pursues neither cognitive (conceptual) nor pragmatic (practical) ends as the purpose of the judgement. Neither a knowledge claim nor a function ascribed to an object are at stake, merely the pleasure in the subject’s faculties’ presentation of form. Taste is also distinguished from the venal affections of appetite, which are dependent on the object of the appetitive pleasure, rather than in taste, on form alone. When it is released from these types of dependent judgments, taste gains an (analogous) connection with moral significance because its quality of disinterested liking shows that liking can be independent of “satisfaction.” If something can be “liked for its own sake,” aesthetic taste provides support for the liking for the moral law and encouragement for moral action, which goes against sensuous inclinations and strategic calculations. Kant connects taste not just with a moral interest, but with the social interest in communicating one’s judgments. The communication of taste is the key way that the expectation for agreement in disinterested judgements is expressed, and also the way that such judgments are enhanced and developed.³⁵

The motivation for the Kantian theory has some striking points of compatibility with Rancière’s position on reverie, in regard specifically to the universal status of the capacity and the moral significance that can be attached to its exercise and communication. We might say that the articulation of this universal status against the privileges of “expertise” is compatible with Rancière’s notion of intellectual equality, and that the exercise of this capacity for aesthetic taste in Kant has a loose parallel with the emphasis Rancière places on the verification of equality. However, the disengagement from activity that is the core of the definition of reverie has no direct parallel in this concept of aesthetic disinterest. In fact, it is at odds with the general framework of Kantian aesthetics, which intends to demonstrate that his moral philosophy is no mere “theory” of human action, but that it is supported in the seemingly contingent accord between nature’s beautiful forms and judgments of taste. This accord demonstrates “that nature speaks to us figuratively in its beautiful forms” and that there is an “attunement favourable to moral feeling” in the contemplation of “the beautiful forms of nature.”³⁶ Crucially, there is a pleasure attached to the communication of such judgments. And the Kantian approach may on this point be compared with Rancière’s view of the importance of communicating emancipatory experiences, such as reverie.

Recent attempts to use the concept of work to characterize Rancière's approach to emancipation, also risk underplaying the significance of "reverie" as disengagement from action. Jean-Philippe Deranty has contrasted a "workerist" and "post-workerist" position in Rancière's writing. Deranty isolates two "discoveries" that explain the shift in position. He argues that after the split with Althusser, Rancière discovered how "flawed it is to search for a true working class experience" if one denies "the relevance and authenticity of the real working class voices."³⁷ But, in a key methodological development, Rancière later discovers that it is a mistake to ignore those voices that "miss or lead away" from "typical . . . working class experience." The true speech is not the one that represents a position or identity, but the one that seeks to escape from the "proletarian fate."³⁸ In turn, the positive reference to "work as professional culture and social identifier" gives way to a position on work as a purely negative category. There is no dignity "that would be grounded in physical expenditure or manual skill"³⁹; work as a type of experience and culture "is explicitly rejected."⁴⁰ Chapter 3 of the *Nights of Labor*, Deranty points out, is dedicated "to denouncing the perniciousness of any positive reference to the necessity of work, which ignores the suffering entailed in the necessity to have to work in order to live."⁴¹ Further, the last part of the book shows how the utopian disciples of Saint-Simon were not able to combine the political and legal demands of workers for "full equality and freedom, with the dream of the association of free producers."⁴² Nonetheless, against the thesis of a shift away from the workerist perspective in Rancière's writing, Deranty argues that work is more like a "vanishing mediator" across the corpus. It is not just that the workerist period "bequeathed" the defining notion of the "intelligence of the oppressed" to the post-workerist perspective, but that the distance now taken to the associative model of work may be negative, but it is nonetheless still a key principle: "the historical examples of the proletarian writers demonstrate a general truth about politics; namely, that it is waged as the attempt to escape the denial of freedom and equality entailed in the different forms of social destiny."⁴³ Work is thus the "secret source"⁴⁴ of the later aesthetic and political writing. Rancière's "originality . . . stems from the complex logic he establishes between social life and political claims" such that social life has no explanatory or causal relation to politics. This distinctive approach to politics did not just originate in his "study of the labour movement," for even in texts after 1995 "the world of work" continues "to represent the paradigmatic example of such politics."⁴⁵

Deranty's focus falls on how ways out of an oppressed position are conceptualized and articulated. Rancière's position is built up, Deranty states, as a "complex process of sedimentation" where the "positive elements are retained as established principles, while negative elements account for the more spectacular shifts."⁴⁶ This construction, which intends to explain different positions in the corpus along an arc of development, presents the later emphasis on exit points as opposed to identities, in terms of methodological refinements.

In his response to Deranty, Rancière characterizes the drive to systematize his corpus as consistent with the practices that define the publishing category of *“French Thought.”*⁴⁷ He identifies the puzzle his own writing poses for such systematic treatment, since it is a collection of “various interventions” on “disordered topics.”⁴⁸ Although he acknowledges the presence of references to the topic of work and the plausibility of Deranty’s arrangement of them, Rancière asks whether in looking for a methodological thread to organize the scattered corpus, the full meaning he ascribes to the topic of work is adequately captured.⁴⁹ In particular, if his stated interest is in pursuing a “genealogy” of the mechanisms that concern “willed action” rather than “work,”⁵⁰ then, he argues, the perspective of aesthetic experience is the decisive one: “Rousseau’s *reverie*, Kant’s finality without end, Schiller’s play impulse, all signal the abolition of [the] division of the world into two kinds of sensible humanity.”⁵¹ It is true that this abolition “has practical counterparts in the forms of emancipation through which the workers declare themselves inhabitants of the same sensible world as the poets.”⁵² But the key point is that at its core emancipation “entails the acquisition of the most precious of goods that the men of action had so far kept to themselves that is, *the power to do nothing and to want to do nothing.*”⁵³ Hence Rancière describes the story of Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* in the following way:

This is the story of a plebeian who has used all possible strategies to climb the social ladder and who discovers, while waiting for death in jail, the true secret of happiness, which is to do nothing and to no longer want anything. The lesson is not just valid for the individualistic artist; it is also true for the rise of the class of workers in the new society. The . . . Saint-Simonians who had gone to recruit shock workers for their industrial armies only encounter dreamers who find nothing better to express their adherence to the new faith than this formula, by one of them: “When I think about the beauties of Saint-Simonism, my hand stops.”⁵⁴

The workers of the popular revolution had already asserted as part of their reign: “the pleasure to do nothing, the pleasure to erase the old separations between activity and passivity, between work and leisure.”⁵⁵ There is a “suspension” of activity “at the heart of emancipatory practice,” which theses about emancipatory politics translate “in the terms of science and strategy” to “endlessly . . . correct . . . the illusions of the agents of production.”⁵⁶ He refers to Althusserianism and “Marxist theses about the necessity to wait for the development of the productive forces, as a necessary preamble to any revolutionary action, as a way of still translating in the terms of science and strategy this suspension at the heart of emancipatory practice.”⁵⁷ Rancière views this suspension as an emancipatory experience; for him, its “translation” into “science and strategy” hollows it out. But what of the translation of this suspension into a “theory of work”?

Deranty's account of Rancière's writing from the perspective of "work" focuses on the implications of signal methodological choices. The strategy is appropriate for his systematizing treatment, and its retrospectively unifying perspective on the corpus. However, Rancière's use of the state of reverie may be cited to show that he is not interested in writing a theory of work, but in presenting different experiences of an exit from willed action. I would now like to explore the implications of this focus on experience as an approach to the topic of emancipation. The approach may be analyzed in the context of Rancière's treatment of the state of reverie, but, I will argue below, its working examples are not reducible to such an instance of disengagement from "willed action."

The Action of Inaction: Emancipatory and Communicable Experiences

We have covered the classical distinction between work and leisure in Aristotle. We have also considered Aristotle's central thesis that the excellence of true action elevates the state of leisure, and those entitled to it, above those who work. And we have looked at Rancière's counter view that in the age of revolutions it is reverie, not leisure, that is the emancipated state.

When Rancière gives the critical account of leisure that underpins his positive view of reverie, he often highlights the pivotal importance of modern, aesthetic experience. As we saw, it is the potential disturbance that aesthetic experience represents for the contingent set of hierarchical arrangements that constitute social order, that marks its importance. The social order enforces a division of the sensible, which new forms of perception, such as the attention to the microperceptions that are used to describe events in modern literature, promise to render otiose. Hence, aesthetic experience is connected in a loose sense with the dissolution of hierarchies involved in revolutionary experience. Sometimes Rancière puts this point quite forcefully. Aesthetic experience is charged, he writes, with the "abolition of a whole set of oppositions that used to structure the sharing/dividing of the sensible: activity/passivity, work/leisure, play/seriousness." This abolition of "the old order" is focused on the

rule that granted the same men the privileges of gratuitous leisure and of true action that aims only for its own perfection. Leisure, Aristotle said, is not a break between two periods of work; leisure is the condition of those who are free from its constraints. And true action is action that carries its end in itself, not the action that is a means for an external end.⁵⁸

In contrast, reverie is the pleasure in "doing nothing." Reverie is the experience of the abolition of the work/leisure opposition. And, this opposition is one way that the prevailing division of the sensible is structured. Reverie is also prominent in Rancière's discussion of modern literature as an

exemplary expression of the desuetude of the association between leisure and nobility. It figures in his discussions of Stendhal and Ibsen, amongst others.⁵⁹

If we step back from the specific contexts in which he discusses reverie, it might seem odd, however, that Rancière so favors reverie, when his celebrated writing on intellectual emancipation highlights precisely the need for willed engagement, which is obviously foreign to the disengaged state of the “dreamer.” Indeed, the state of reverie with its suspended relation to action in cases, such as Stendhal’s Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black*, seems in direct conflict with his comments on the will and motivation in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. In this book, one of the most significant in his career, Rancière reflects on the stultifying effects of “intellectual” mastery. Such stultification occurs when the student’s intellectual activity is mediated and restricted by the teacher’s explications. The experience is a demotivating one because it binds “one mind to another.”⁶⁰ Against such aggregation, Rancière, parsing Jacotot, writes: “In the act of teaching and learning there are two wills and two intelligences. We will call their coincidence *stultification*. In the experimental situation Jacotot created, the student was linked to a will, Jacotot’s, and to an intelligence, the book’s—the two entirely distinct. We will call the known and maintained difference of the two relations—the act of an intelligence obeying only itself even while the will obeys another will—*emancipation*.” The characterization of the pivotal role of the will in intellectual emancipation is worth noting. It is not just that “attention and research” are driven by the will, but that “the lack of will [is what] causes intelligence to make mistakes.”⁶¹ Intellectual emancipation in this work does not occur without the will.⁶² The point is crucial since it is the basis of Rancière’s view that the institutionalization of Jacotot’s practice of intellectual emancipation is destined to fail. Rancière (through the example of Jacotot) argues that intellectual emancipation is an experience that is verified by the exercise of the individual will, rather than a problem that could be solved by an institution, or a set of guidelines.⁶³ Verification is both a *practice* of equality and a *communicable experience* (hence the transmission of this experience from Jacotot to Rancière).

The focus on the aesthetic basis of the social revolution in instances of reordered social perception may, in this respect, obscure the crucial point: experience is the key to Rancière’s conception of emancipation. He doesn’t write a theory of emancipation based in methodological refinements about how to approach the expressions of the oppressed. Nor does he write a theory of emancipation in which emancipation is based in models of aesthetic perception.

Let me be more direct. If reverie is the abolition of the work/leisure opposition, its significance does not lie in a raft of refined theoretical objections to this opposition, but in the very existence and communication of the dreamer’s experience. Instead of a version of the Kantian, aesthetic concept of disinterest, which in Kant was primed to support moral action, or a

post-workerist perspective that focuses on how the oppressed express their aspirations for emancipation, the references Rancière makes to states of reverie emphasize that for him, emancipation is a communicable experience, or it is nothing. This does not mean, however, that he reduces emancipation to a state of reverie. Rather, as his comments in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* about the will to exercise one's intelligence show, emancipation is real to the extent that it is verified: "Equality is not given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is *verified*."⁶⁴

Hence, the two perspectives—the power to do nothing, and the exercise of one's intelligence—are able to be reconciled in the following way: Each is an experience of an emancipated state. The difference is that the first is disengaged from action, whereas the second is not. Like the disengaged state, the action of the emancipated intelligence communicates what it does. Emancipated intelligence communicates when it "gives the means of verifying [that] action."⁶⁵ In the case of reverie, too, its existence is communicated in the description of the pleasure of this state in archives and literature.

It is true that it is especially significant for Rancière's account that it is in aesthetic and historical contexts, rather than in political theory, that the abolition of work and activity in reverie is articulated. But, the tendency to focus on its aesthetic context risks overlooking what is most prominent in the account: that is, whether or not the state of reverie is found in the workers' archives, or in arguments about aesthetics in philosophy, or in works of modern literature—these instances all present describable states of emancipation. Rancière's position differs from those that advocate changes to the operation of the work/leisure distinction so that the two sides bleed into the other, and the division of labor gives way to a notion of fulfilling work. The significance of his discussion of different written states of reverie is that these resources are rich in their motivational effects precisely because they describe realized and realizable states. When he presents Jacotot's educational experiments in intellectual equality under the sign of a "verifiable" axiom, the accent is again on what can be experienced rather than what can be systematized in a "theory."

In the case of the distinction between work and leisure in Aristotle, true action is reserved for those who enjoy the nobility of leisure. Rancière, in contrast, selects inaction as the model of emancipation because it is a realized feature of workers' experiences in *Proletarian Nights*. It is the engagement of the will and motivated action that defines intellectual emancipation in other works. Against the view that these two positions are in conflict, I have argued here that they each represent a view of emancipation as a state that is not just experienced, but also put into words. The emancipated life is not a foreign creature one advocates for, nor is it a confection of "theoretical" efforts. The experience of emancipation happens, and it is communicable. Distilling and describing varieties of emancipatory experiences, including instances of the state of reverie in literary and archival contexts, as well as those that require

an engaged will, is the way that Rancière expresses his solidarity with those on the side of intellectual emancipation, and against those who belong to the organizing forces of science and strategy.

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1 See Louis Althusser et. al., *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* (London: Verso, 2015), 73-175.

2 A theme in *Proletarian Nights* is the articulation of social, as well as personal dreams. Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (London: Verso, 2012), see 424-426.

3 See Rahel Jaeggi, who gives this terminology an extension of sorts when she includes issues related to contemporary identity politics in *Alienation*, trans. Frederick Neuhauser and Alan Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

4 See Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Early Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 279-401, esp. 378 ff. Marx's focus is the wage-laborer who experiences their labor power as having an existence that is external to them. It is not just that they experience their labor as alienated, but as exercising power and domination over them. The product of their labor is the property of another. The value that the labourer produces above and beyond the maintenance of "labor power" is the "surplus value" that accrues to capital. According to Marx, the capitalist mode of production "alienates" workers from their "species' essence" of the pursuit of purposeful activities.

5 See note 20, below.

6 For a critical discussion, see Jean-Philippe Deranty, Christoph Dejours, Emmanuel Renault et. al, *The Return of Work in Critical Theory: Self, Society, Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

7 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Two Volumes*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1337 b23, 2122.

8 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1337 b33-b34, 2122.

- 9 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1338 a4-a5, 2122.
- 10 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1338 b2, 2123.
- 11 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1338 b32, 2123.
- 12 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1328 b35-b36, 2108, cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177 b4, 1861.
- 13 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1328 b25-b26, 2108.
- 14 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1328 b37-b38, 2108-2109.
- 15 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1328 b38-b1329 a2, 2109.
- 16 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1269 b12, 2014.
- 17 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1334 a19-a21, 2117.
- 18 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1329 a20, 2109.
- 19 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1329 a24-a26, 2109.
- 20 One apposite example of this view would be William Morris' revival of artisanal techniques in everything from book publishing to furniture and wallpaper. Morris distrusted the separation of design from production, and railed against the separation of beauty from use in industrial production on the one hand, and wasteful displays of luxury on the other. His view was that there should be "nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful." The connection between use and beauty was intimately related to the labor that produced artifacts: "No work which cannot be done with pleasure in the doing is worth doing," Morris in J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1899) 62-64. See also Kristin Ross's discussion of Morris' views on the Paris commune and the inequality of the classes in *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2015). She focuses on the international and transversal perspective of his views on 60-61.
- 21 Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights* (London: Verso, 2012), 59. See also *Proletarian Nights*, 45, and for a description of Gauny in a state of reverie, see 81.
- 22 See Yannik Thiem, "Critical Theory in the Age of the Knowledge Capitalism: Elusive Exploitation, Affects and New Political Economies," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31, no. 3 (2017): 468-480.
- 23 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* ([Macmillan, 1899] New York: Dover Books, 1994) 28. Veblen's focus on the honorific status of leisure separates his approach from the analysis of leisure in Jürgen Habermas' analysis of the bourgeois public sphere, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Polity Press, [1962] 1989). Habermas identifies how once leisure pursuits "become part of the cycle of production and consumption," they are individualized, apolitical

expressions that are incapable of constituting a “world emancipated from the immediate constraints of survival needs” (160-161).

24 Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 28.

25 Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 244.

26 Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 53. See T. W. Adorno’s critique of Veblen, “Veblen’s Attack on Culture: Remarks Occasioned by Theory of the Leisure Class,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 9, no. 3 (1941): 389-413: “Veblen stands for the bad conscience of leisure. He confronts middle class society with its own principle of utility and demonstrates to it that according to its own criteria its culture is waste and sham, that it is so irrational as to refute the rationality of the whole system. He has something of the quality of the burgher who takes the postulate of thrift quite seriously” (399). Adorno is critical above all of Veblen’s “puritan ethos of workmanship” (400). Veblen “dislikes about capitalism . . . its waste rather than its exploitation. He dislikes every superfluous action.” On Adorno’s view, Veblen “presupposes” rather than “analyses” the “concepts of the useful and the useless” (401). See also William Morris who connects waste with exploitation, note 20.

27 Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 37. See also Kristin Ross’s *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Minneapolis: MIT Press, 1995) for an analysis of how the post-World War II French consumption of luxury goods and time saving devices for household chores, paradoxically involved both more intense labor on household chores, which now convey, *pace* Veblen, a higher prestige measure, as well as more time at work in order to finance these purchases, resulting in a leisure-driven, but work-obsessed and dependent economy.

28 Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 220-222.

29 Jacques Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 57.

30 Jacques Rancière, “Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed,” translation from Flaubert by Rancière, *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008): 233-248, 242.

31 Rancière, “Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed,” 243.

32 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1333 a17, 2115.

33 Examples include the character of Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black*, who Rancière discusses in the context of the suspension from action, the “quality of sensible experience where one *does nothing*” in *Aisthesis*, 46. His emphasis.

34 Sorel, *Aisthesis*, 46.

35 In this context, Kant describes the interest in taste as a social sense. He specifies that this indirect interest has its basis in our “inclination to society” and as such is

- merely an empirical interest in the beautiful. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1986) §41, 166.
- 36 Kant, *Critique of Judgment* §42, 166-168.
- 37 Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Work in the Writings of Jacques Rancière," in *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality*, eds. Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross (London: Continuum, 2012): 187-205, 197.
- 38 Deranty, "Work in the Writings of Jacques Rancière," 197.
- 39 Jacques Rancière, *Nights of Labor*, Deranty's modified translation, 45.
- 40 Deranty, "Work in the Writings of Jacques Rancière," 198.
- 41 Deranty, "Work in the Writings of Jacques Rancière," 199.
- 42 Deranty, "Work in the Writings of Jacques Rancière," 199.
- 43 Deranty, "Work in the Writings of Jacques Rancière," 200.
- 44 Deranty, "Work in the Writings of Jacques Rancière," 201.
- 45 Deranty, "Work in the Writings of Jacques Rancière," 204.
- 46 Deranty, "Work in the Writings of Jacques Rancière," 200.
- 47 Jacques Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," in *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene*, 205-217, 205, his emphasis and capitals.
- 48 Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," 205.
- 49 Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," 206.
- 50 Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," 215.
- 51 Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," 216.
- 52 Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," 216.
- 53 Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," 216, emphasis added.
- 54 Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," 216. See also Alison Ross, "The Conception of the Will in Rancière's Aesthetic Regime of the Arts: Pathos and Reverie in Stendhal, Ibsen and Freud," in *Understanding Rancière, Understanding Modernism*, ed. Patrick Bray (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017) 179-197.
- 55 Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," 216.
- 56 Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," 216.
- 57 Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," 216.
- 58 Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," 215-216.
- 59 See Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 39-53; Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious* (London, UK: Polity, 2009), 69-82.
- 60 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 13: "There is no intelligence where there is aggregation, the *binding* of one mind to

another. There is intelligence where each person acts, tells what he is doing, and gives the means of verifying the reality of his action,” (32). Note, that each person acting and *telling* what they do is the “means of verifying the reality” of action. A similar emphasis on *telling* the emancipatory effects of reverie connects the two examples and distinguishes the experience of emancipation from a private state without any collective implications.

61 Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 54 and 55.

62 Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 54: “Will is the power to be moved, to act by its *own* movement, before being an instance of choice.”

63 Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 119 and 130.

64 Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 137.

65 Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 32.